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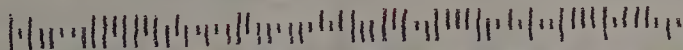
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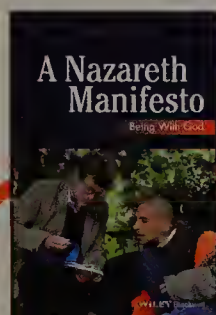
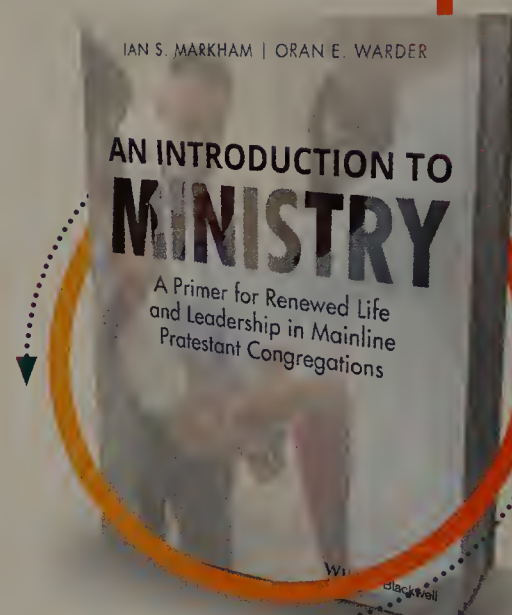
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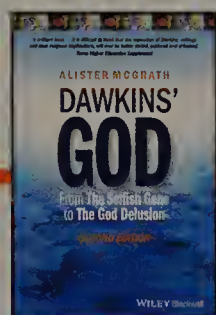
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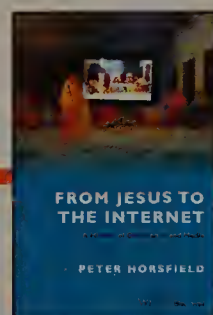
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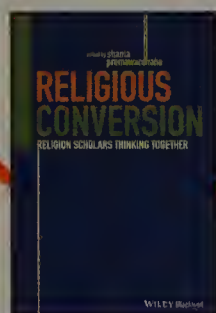
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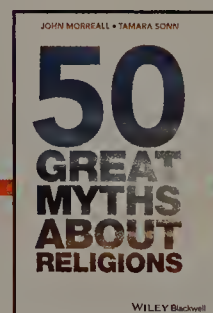
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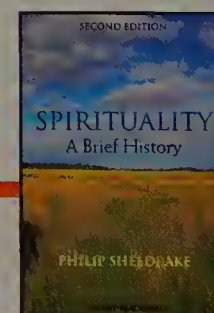
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## Doing one thing well

AT A MEETING supporting the work of the micro-credit organization Opportunity International, I was seated next to a friend who had worked as a top executive with a mainline denomination. After hearing about OI's impressive array of programs, we noted that it was doing the kind of work that denominations have been doing for years.

But there's one big and important difference, said my friend. OI can focus all its energy and resources on a single, well-defined mission, while denominations must focus on many different programs and priorities: global mission, church order and discipline, theology, education, leadership training, curriculum, publishing, and ecumenical relations. In the process, declining resources are spread thin. OI does one thing: development. And it does it well.

Last year 12 million people used an OI microloan or through OI established a savings account, purchased insurance, or received training to help break the cycle of poverty. More than \$1 billion was loaned to entrepreneurs around the world—90 percent of them women. A food vendor in Colombia received training, updated her kitchen, and improved sales. She hired four neighbors, raising her sales further and making a positive impact on 20 people. That's efficient development.

Independent, single-purpose organizations have picked up pieces of what the church used to do. Not long ago, for example, a denomination's national structure included a division for housing. Today Habitat for Humanity, which unapologetically

reflects the churches' mission, works with diverse communities to provide affordable housing.

Maybe Phyllis Tickle was right that this is all about church change, that every 500 years the church has "a giant rummage sale." Churches are slowly relinquishing responsibility for mission programs that are run more efficiently by other organizations.

This shift offers an opportunity for unchurched people to join in church work. Robert Lupton observes that a strong commitment to helping others is part of our national character. "Ninety percent of American adults are involved personally or financially in the charity industry," he says.

I serve on the board of Operation Walk Chicago, another effective nonprofit. This medical service organization provides knee and hip replacements to people who cannot otherwise afford this life-changing surgery. (I've been a beneficiary of joint replacement surgery and know firsthand how it dramatically improves one's life.) Teams of Operation Walk volunteer surgeons and other medical personnel, mostly from Northwestern Hospital in Chicago, spend two weeks in a developing nation, performing 30–70 joint replacements and training local surgeons and medical personnel. Teams have traveled to China, India, Vietnam, Ecuador, and Nepal and have initiated programs in underserved areas of Chicago.

Opportunity International and Operation Walk do good work for which people of faith can be deeply grateful.

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## LETTERS

### Callings

I was startled to read in Kathryn Greene-McCreight's thoughtful essay on martyrdom ("United in suffering," Sept. 30) the statement: "For the Christian, martyrdom is never to be enacted as a means of political protest." Martin Luther King Jr., Archbishop Oscar Romero, and seminarian Jonathan Myrick Daniels—to name just three people—enacted gospel-political protests.

Perhaps the problem here is definition. What is a martyr? If we retain the early Christian meaning of *martyr* as nearly identical to *witness*, then we are on surer ground. Greene-McCreight uses the passive phrase: "to be enacted," which obscures who did the enacting. None of the three above chose suicide. All three chose to live, and die, as martyrs.

*Tim Vivian  
Bakersfield, Calif.*

#### Empty nest . . .

Thanks for M. Craig Barnes's reflection on the sacrificial costs for his wife, and for all mothers, of preparing a child to grow up and leave—a "costly" calling ("When a child leaves," Oct. 14). His article explores a very real and often ignored Christian melancholy associated with raising children, a sadness that has both new and eternal intimations.

New, in that there is a growing generation of men, like myself, who have an increased role in raising children (compared to past generations of men), yet often do not have a mother's network to help deal with children leaving—whether friends, community, culture, religion, or even a language of lament. (I know well that men still have unfair advantages over women in most areas of our collective lives.) What will I do, how will I live, and how will the church help, when my children leave, and significant parts of me, and of my daily life and purpose, die with their departure?

Eternal, in that what mothers and fathers suffer here on earth is replicated, ad

infinitum, in heaven. How much pain do our Father and Spirit in heaven suffer in sending their Son away from themselves, and worse, to be tortured and killed by us?

*Dan Orfield  
Houston, Tex.*

#### Preaching the Bible . . .

In his review of Timothy Keller's *Preaching* ("Delight in preaching," Sept. 16), Jason Byassee writes, "Such preaching shows the congregation that the preacher holds the entire Bible to be true."

This is not my goal in preaching. I believe we owe it to the people in the pews to give them the ability to be critical of the biblical material. Bibliolatry is no more freeing than any other idolatry, as we can see in the twisted theology of those who would have us believe that creation took place in 4004 BC.

*Herbert K. Lodder  
Lutherville, Md.*

#### Chinese legacy . . .

I was thrilled to see Lian Xi's article about the Lisu people, the Morse family, the Salween Valley, and Pastor Jesse ("China's gospel valley," Sept. 30). My aunt, Dorothy Sterling, was a medical missionary who the U.S. military flew into China to join the Morses during World War II. She provided medical attention to allied air crews that were forced to ditch their aircraft in China and, with the Morse family, helped guide them over the hump into Burma.

She had wanted to be a missionary to China from age five; ironically the war offered her the opportunity. She loved the Lisu people, serving them in China, Burma, Tibet, and Thailand her entire adult life. She would be so proud to see that the efforts of those dangerous days continue to bear fruit among the Lisu.

*James Sterling  
Mesa, Ariz.*

November 11, 2015

# The best politics is local

**I**n the coming years, will low-income Americans earn a higher minimum wage? Can the public pensions issue be resolved without leaving retirees financially insecure? How will funding be allocated to public universities or for child-care assistance or mental health care? Will poor people have access to health insurance?

We have entered the long season of presidential campaigning, of constant media coverage and hour upon hour of prime-time debates. But the above questions are not primarily for those seeking the highest office in the land. They are a sampling of the many pressing issues in which it is lower offices that have most of the power—issues unlikely to turn on who occupies the White House.

The presidency, however, gets the vast majority of the public's attention. Many Americans lack the time or interest to get much deeper into politics than the top national stories, the most famous names, the race on every voter's ballot. The media landscape is dominated by this same top-down perspective, from cable news to the web. And even those who follow politics closely tend to have a romanticized, inflated sense of the White House and its power. When it comes to domestic affairs, unless there's a Supreme Court vacancy to fill, that power is sharply limited.

In this issue, Benjamin Dueholm writes about the Bernie Sanders campaign and the left's tendency to place its hope in transformational candidates for president ("Liberal messiah," p. 10). The deadlock of divided government in Washington, he argues, won't be broken by the zeal of a leftist president. If progressives want to pursue change through elections, they should put more energy into down-ticket races and building a governing majority.

Nor is this pursuit primarily a matter of winning congressional seats. The real action is at the state and local levels. This is where minimum wage ordinances are being debated and passed, where public unions and social welfare advocates are squaring off against budget hawks, where federal money often arrives in the form of flexible block grants that might or might not be put to effective use.

Local levels of government are also where an individual's voice and vote count the most. And the smaller the jurisdiction, the more likely a political conversation will involve citizens who know each other—people whose real relationships can help get them past slogans and entrenched positions.

What will it take to engage more Americans in local politics? One thing is local institutions such as churches. This election cycle will as usual find churches getting involved in savvy ways and naive ones, in faithful ways and questionable ones. But the churches that make the biggest difference won't be talking about Clinton and Sanders and Bush and Trump. They'll be engaging the statehouse and city hall, the neighborhood and the block—places that don't always show up on CNN or in your Facebook newsfeed but that exercise great influence over the lives of Americans.

**Most Americans have an inflated sense of the power of the presidency.**



# CENTURY marks

**DELIVERED:** A Domino's driver was left in tears when an Ohio congregation tipped her more than \$1,000 after she delivered a \$5.99 pizza. When she arrived with the pizza, the pastor invited her to the front of the sanctuary and told her: "We've been teaching our church this last month about being generous, and so we did something special for you today. We took up a special offering for a tip for you" (*USA Today*, October 14).

**CONVERTED:** Rob Schenck has been an antiabortion activist for years. After the Washington Navy Yard shooting in 2013 that left 13 people dead, Schenck decided that one can't be both "pro-

life" and "pro-guns." Christians shouldn't own guns for defensive purposes, he says. He has been encouraging conservative Christians to get involved in the gun control debate, even though polls show that white evangelicals are the least likely group to support stricter gun laws. His outspokenness about guns has cost his organization financial support. *The Armor of Light*, a documentary about Schenck's change of focus, was released last month (*Washington Post*, October 5).

**ROLE REVERSAL:** President Obama, an admirer of Marilynne Robinson, recently interviewed the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist and essayist. He

told her that he first read *Gilead* when he was campaigning in Iowa, and that one of his favorite characters in fiction is the Reverend John Ames, the central figure in the novel. Their wide-ranging conversation covered her upbringing in Idaho, Midwestern values, fear in public discourse, and what she considers an unappreciated university system. Robinson said she wrote the very first sentence of *Gilead* while waiting to meet her sons in Massachusetts. The male point of view that came to her was a surprise, but the whole novel grew out of that first sentence (*New York Review of Books*, November 5).

**RELIGIOUS VOID:** The world was caught off-guard by the rise of radical Islam, says Jonathan Sacks, former head rabbi of Great Britain, because it was captivated by a narrative that suggests secularism will eventually prevail over religion. Science, technology, free market economies, and even liberal democracy have failed to recognize that humans are meaning-seeking creatures who ask basic questions of identity: Who am I? Why am I here? How should I live? Extremist violent religion is a betrayal of the Abrahamic way, Sacks goes on to say. "Now is the time for us to say what we have failed to say in the past: We are all the children of Abraham. . . . We are blessed. And to be blessed, no one has to be cursed" (*Wall Street Journal*, October 2).

**NOT CHURCHLESS:** Despite the rising number of Americans who identify with no religion—especially the case among millennials—the United States is far from becoming a churchless nation. On any given Sabbath four out of ten Americans attend a house of worship, a number that hasn't fluctu-



*"The enemies of America will know that we mean business when we sell them a fleet of these sweet babies."*



ated much in the past half-century. More than 81 percent of Americans say they identify with a specific religion or denomination, and 78 percent say religion is either very or fairly important in their lives. That people have greater freedom to say they belong to no religion may mean that those who claim religious faith actually take it more seriously than was the case when identifying with religious faith was a matter of social obligation (*The Christian Science Monitor*, October 11).

**OILY BEHAVIOR:** Two separate, independent investigations of the petroleum company Exxon are releasing very similar findings, according to global-warming activist Bill McKibben. Both reports conclude that Exxon knew about the effects of global warming years ago but hid its findings from the public, denied global-warming science, and participated in efforts to obstruct the politics of global warming. As early as 1978 insider scientists told top executives at Exxon that climate change was real, was caused by human activity, and would raise world temperatures. Instead of alerting the rest of the world, Exxon used its knowledge to buy oil leases in areas where it knew ice would melt, and used its finances to fund efforts to squelch global-warming research (*Guardian*, October 14).

**MAKING A KILLING:** Martin Shkreli, CEO of Turing Pharmaceuticals, earned the opprobrium of many when he hiked the price of a drug used to treat a life-threatening parasite from \$13.50 a tablet to \$750—an increase of 5,500 percent. Legally, pharmaceuticals can charge any price they like in the U.S., where clients pay on average double the amount for drugs compared to other developed countries. Pharmaceutical companies claim that developing new drugs is very expensive. However, nine of the ten top drug makers spend more money on marketing their drugs than developing new ones. Big Pharma has an unusually high markup for its products (*The Week*, October 17).

**DEEP POCKETS:** A very small number of people contributed the prepon-

“The problem is not that there is an endless supply of deeply disturbed young men who are willing to contemplate horrific acts. It’s worse. It’s that young men no longer need to be deeply disturbed to contemplate horrific acts.”

— Malcolm Gladwell, arguing that as mass killings increase, the threshold for young men who engage in them goes down (*New Yorker*, October 19).

“If you can’t persuade a majority of your colleagues, maybe you should accept their position. You might be wrong!”

— Conservative columnist David Brooks, critiquing the Freedom Caucus in the House of Representatives, who may deadlock the process of selecting a speaker (*New York Times*, October 13).

derance of money to the presidential race through June 30. Only 158 families and the companies they control contributed \$176 million in the first phase of the campaign. Most of this money comes from people who are involved in two industries: finance and energy. Most of these large donors are giving to Republican candidates, supporting candidates who promise to cut regulations on business, cut taxes on income and capital gains and inherited wealth, and pare back entitlement programs. Many of these families come from only nine different cities, some living in the same neighborhoods (*New York Times*, October 10).

**PROUD TO LOSE:** Harvard University’s debate team won national championships the past two years, but they recently lost a debate to a team from the Eastern New York Correctional Facility. The inmate debaters in this maximum security prison take courses at nearby Bard College. The Harvard team posted on its Facebook page: “There are few teams we are prouder of having lost a debate to than the phenomenally intelligent and articulate team we faced this weekend.” The prison debate team has also defeated teams from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, which they debate annually, and the University of Vermont (AP).

## DEADLY FORCE

SOURCE: UNODC (VOX.COM, OCTOBER 1)





If Sanders became president, what would change?

# Liberal messiah

by Benjamin J. Dueholm

THE CAMPAIGN for the Democratic nomination for president began in earnest on July 1, when Vermont senator Bernie Sanders addressed a crowd of 10,000 in Madison, Wisconsin. Sanders had already drawn impressive crowds in Denver, Minneapolis, and elsewhere. But the Madison rally was the biggest event yet for any candidate in the 2016 field. The sheer size of the crowd made journalists covering the previously dreary Democratic primary contest sit up and take notice.

"Politics in a democratic society should not be complicated," the candidate told the roaring crowd. "Politics is not a soap opera," but rather "people coming together to make life better for our people." A populist both in rhetoric and in his unassuming, somewhat sham-bolic self-presentation, Sanders showed why he has managed to pull ahead of Hillary Clinton in polls of early-voting Iowa and New Hampshire, and why he has filled arenas in urban centers and progressive strongholds around the country.

Sanders is running uphill against the neglect of major media and the hostility of the party's officeholding and check-writing elite. But he has tapped into the latent enthusiasm of the progressive part—so far, the overwhelmingly white, college-educated progressive part—of the party's base. His campaign's unvarnished emphasis on economic inequality is no doubt part of his appeal. So are his ardently progressive positions on jobs, the minimum wage, and campaign finance.

But the crowd in Madison saved its heartiest approval for the moments when Sanders reached beyond a liberal wish list to herald a more dramatic transformation in American politics. "All of

these guys," Sanders said of Wall Street and corporate America, "have so much power that no president can defeat them unless there is an organized grassroots movement making them an offer they can't refuse." The Republican Party and too many Democrats, Sanders went on, "are owned by big money interests." The answer is "a political revolution in America."

It is an appeal with a familiar ring. Wisconsin, after all, launched George McGovern—once an obscure senator, then a grassroots hero—to the Democratic nomination in 1972. The state gave

built-in advantages from demographics and the electoral map. In 2012 Obama won the national popular vote by 4 percentage points. Some of the states he won were closer than that—but he would have been reelected even if he'd lost those states.

Yet Republicans have controlled the House of Representatives for all but four of the last 22 years. Their current margin is so large that their majority will likely hold until after 2020. The Senate is closer, but the road to a Democratic majority in 2016 is hard and will be harder in 2018. At the state level the situation is

## What progressives have not done is build a coalition for changing public policy.

Barack Obama one of his biggest margins in the 2008 primaries. Sanders follows their path of presenting a presidential campaign as a mass movement that can circumvent congressional wrangling and overawe entrenched interests to rewrite the rules of politics.

Many liberal voters think these rules need rewriting, and understandably so. As the Democrats enter the 2016 election season, they find themselves in a vexing, even paradoxical position.

The party's candidates have won the popular vote in five of the last six presidential elections. Obama won an outright majority of the popular vote in both 2008 and 2012—only the second president to do so twice since Eisenhower, an international hero who could have won the presidency on either party's ticket. The Democratic nominee will start with

more dire still. In 2010 and 2014, states that vote reliably for Democratic presidential candidates elected very conservative Republican governors. Many of these governors enjoy GOP legislative majorities in one or both houses.

The result of all this has been a frustrating deadlock. When federal policy does get made, it often happens through high-stakes negotiations between the Democratic president and the Republican Speaker of the House. In some cases, policy change comes through the limited scope of executive orders—or through the moral intuitions of Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, who cast decisive votes both to dramatically weaken the Voting Rights Act (a law passed by huge majorities in Congress) and to overturn state bans on same-sex marriage (bans approved by popular vote). Meanwhile, major revisions of labor law and education policy are hap-



pening at the state level, beyond the reach of the presidency.

While the situation makes it tempting to throw progressive activist energy behind a messianic bid for the presidency, it also makes such a strategy dubious. Sanders is undoubtedly a valuable senator for progressive economic issues. His campaign has forced Clinton to work for voters she might otherwise have taken for granted and to adopt positions she may otherwise have shied away from. He may yet prove to be a viable national candidate. But the Sanders campaign rests on a highly doubtful proposition: that a grassroots movement capable of electing a frankly progressive president can also, more or less by itself, force more progressive policy outcomes. Sanders has only suggested this with his talk of a political revolution, but his supporters have taken this hope very much to heart.

Obama offered a similar (if ideologically hazier) hope eight years ago. Then it was a movement that could cut through destructive partisanship and bring people together for the common good. Reality, after the heady days of 2008, proved unaccommodating. Obama has earned some of the frustration progressives feel toward him. His turn toward austerity after the 2010 midterms was unsuccessful both as politics and as policy, and his willingness to negotiate over the debt ceiling invited financial and political disaster. He didn't take monetary policy seriously enough and as a consequence may have slowed the economic recovery.

But at no point in his presidency was Obama the actor who limited the progressive potential of legislation. Even with Democratic majorities in both houses and a mammoth mailing list of people engaged in grassroots lobbying, bills on health care, economic recovery, and financial reform needed the support of lawmakers much less liberal than he. The proposal to limit carbon emissions, which passed the House in 2009, never came up for a vote in a Senate with a filibuster-proof 60 Democrats. Had Bernie Sanders been president in 2009, piloting that same network of small donors and grassroots activists, those same limitations would have applied. His proposal to expand Medicare into uni-



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

**POPULIST? Enthusiasm for a candidate is not the power of governance.**

versal health insurance would have had no better chance of becoming law.

So there is something subtly discouraging about the Sanders presidential crusade. It is, if nothing else, an instance of the ongoing progressive fixation on the presidency as the definitive pivot of American politics.

Progressives are hardly alone in this. The cult of the imperial presidency, bolstered by the real and symbolic powers of the office, is widely accepted—even by political journalists who affect a kind of hard-nosed cynicism about the political process. But it holds a special fascination for progressives. Their firmament is studied with presidential heroes. Franklin Roosevelt is foremost, but Kennedy and now, as Vietnam fades in the national memory, Lyndon Johnson are objects of a kind of political reverence. Indeed, the only Democratic president since FDR who does not inspire at least a modicum of nostalgia is Jimmy Carter.

Each of these presidents was criticized, often vigorously, from the left. Each was deeply compromised, whether by racial politics, war, or mere calculation. Yet in retrospect, each is credited with rewriting the rules of American politics, as if by their own ideas, force of personality, and ability to seize the spirit of their times. Even failed candidates, from McGovern to Jesse Jackson, wear some of the sheen of transformative figures.

For conservatives, the pantheon is simpler: Ronald Reagan stands alone.

The considerable political and policy successes of Eisenhower, Nixon, and George H. W. Bush are largely neglected. This has given rise to an embarrassing, even comical Reagan necromancy among Republican presidential hopefuls. But conservatives have also done something progressives have not: they have built an impressive coalition for winning in Congress and in the states.

Observers and activists point out that in many states, districts have been drawn to maximize Republican victories, aided by the denser geographical distribution of Democratic voters. And turnout in midterm elections is dramatically lower than in presidential years and is concentrated among older, whiter, and wealthier voters—voters who tend to favor Republicans.

But this is a question dressed up as an answer. Sanders drew a massive crowd in Madison, but that grassroots activism didn't manage to defeat Wisconsin governor Scott Walker in three chances, or even to dent his legislative majorities. Somehow the progressive energy that coalesces around quixotic presidential campaigns doesn't translate into minds changed and voters turned out when it's time to elect down-ticket candidates. And this down-ticket engagement is needed even, perhaps especially, for the kind of milquetoast officeholders who can push the policy center even slightly

*Benjamin J. Dueholm is associate pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church in Wauconda, Illinois.*




in a more progressive direction—the kind of Democrats Sanders dismisses as being “owned” by hostile interests.

This is the missing link in the argument of every presidential crusade of this sort: how to turn grassroots energy and zeal into a governing majority. Sanders, no less than Obama or any other Democratic president, will have to take his promise to rewrite the rules of

American politics and modulate it into a plan for winning by the rules as they are.

The progressive triumphs of the New Deal and the Great Society, and even those of the Obama years, didn’t come through presidential speeches or unfiltered grassroots energy. They came through the votes of hundreds of forgotten time-servers and ward-heelers. These people were chosen and held account-

able by unions, farm organizations, church groups, and county party organizations with an identity extending beyond an individual campaign or issue. If progressives don’t temper their presidential enthusiasms with greater efforts to build such organizations, the swing from the euphoria of the presidential crusade to the discontents of governing will only grow wider and swifter. 

## Ministry on a troubled corner

# Bible camp in the street

by *Kate Foster Connors*

**FIVE MILES WEST** and a little to the north of the tourist hub of Baltimore is a neighborhood called Mosher, which many refer to as “the other Baltimore.” Mosher is known as a rough area. More than half the children in the neighborhood live below the poverty line. It has an unemployment rate of 24 percent, with 90 percent of children in neighborhood schools receiving free and reduced lunch, and only 35 percent of eighth graders passing the state math exams in 2013. In many of the houses, three or four generations live under one roof. Other houses are vacant and boarded up.

Two years ago a local leader named Richard Parker asked Hunting Ridge Presbyterian Church to consider providing a peaceful presence in Mosher. Parker had seen the spike in Baltimore violence and organized an antiviolence rally. Although the church is located only a mile west of Mosher, none of the members of Hunting Ridge live in the neighborhood. Members had been eager, however, to find a way to be engaged in the community.

Pastor Deborah McEachran and oth-

ers from the church gathered every Friday at a street corner known for drug dealing and gang-related crime. The group stood on the corner for a few hours to reclaim it as a peaceful space.

At first no one knew what to do during those hours. But then members of the group began talking with neighborhood residents, and got to know the business owners. Someone brought chess and

borhood association; Willie Ray, who runs the antiviolence ministry Save Another Youth; and Arthenia LeFlore. LeFlore, known as a “block mother” in the neighborhood, runs One Heart One Way Ministry, providing clothing and food for neighborhood residents. When I visited, she was filling bags of food for a single father with two children, one of whom has a severe disability.

## A coalition of churches makes a witness in a Baltimore neighborhood.

checkers, and soon neighbors were sitting down and playing games. When the weather turned cold, business owners ran power cords out to the sidewalk so the church group could provide hot coffee. And when the weather grew warmer, Hunting Ridge members put flower planters on the corners. A youth member of a nearby church painted a mural of children on the side of one of the businesses.

Soon Hunting Ridge’s members met Leslie Howard, president of the neigh-

As the Hunting Ridge group prepared to take a break from its corner ministry during the coldest winter months, some of them began talking with LeFlore about expanding their ministry. Was there a way for more members from their church to become involved in the neighborhood? These conversations led to the first Harlem Avenue Bible Camp.

Hunting Ridge Presbyterian and Arthenia LeFlore asked for help from the Rehoboth Church of God in Christ Jesus Apostolic, which provided volun-



teers, and from the Center (where I work), a mission partnership of the Presbytery of Baltimore that connects church groups from around the country with opportunities to serve in Baltimore. Soon ten youth and adult leaders from White Memorial Presbyterian Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, had signed on to serve as counselors during the camp.

**W**ith so many people involved, the planning process for the camp was a challenge. Racial tensions, ever present in Baltimore, provided a constant backdrop during the planning process. When some residents met Hunting Ridge's white pastor, some assumed that the church was all-white, and expressed concerns about a "white suburban church" coming to "do good" in a black neighborhood. In reality, Hunting Ridge is a multicultural congregation, with members who have come from Myanmar, Colombia, South Korea, Ghana, and Haiti.

The Center was concerned about how an all-white youth group from North Carolina (from a church called White Memorial!) would relate to people in an all-black neighborhood. The church decided to require that youth participating in the Bible camp have previous mission trip experience. The director of high school ministry planned a series of programs so that Bible school volunteers could learn about white privilege.

When the week of Bible camp arrived, Mosher residents came out every evening to sit on their stoops and watch. "Harlem Avenue has never had anything like this before," many of them said. The camp obtained permission from the city to block off the street, and it set up in the middle of the street, using pop-up tents provided by the city. There was dinner each night, with children and volunteers eating together, singing hymns, and listening to Bible stories. A curriculum from Heifer International provided daily scripture lessons and themes, and volunteers led crafts projects and recreation activities. In the middle of the week there was a field trip to a farm.

*Kate Foster Connors is director of the Center, an urban mission partnership of the Baltimore Presbytery.*



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CENTER

**COLLABORATIVE MINISTRY:** *The Harlem Avenue Bible Camp in Baltimore's Mosher neighborhood brings together diverse groups of people.*

One morning's devotion was based on Moses and the burning bush. "Look and listen for what God is already doing in Baltimore," leaders told the campers. "You might not see a burning bush, but God is alive and already at work here—your job is to pay attention and let us know what you notice."

What participants noticed was that African-American children were at work and play with immigrant children from Myanmar (Falaam Baptist Church of Baltimore), African-American volunteers from Harlem Avenue, Jamaican immigrant volunteers from the Rehoboth Church, and white volunteers from White Memorial Church. A praise dancer, an African storyteller, and African drummers led programs. Mothers of

the children from Myanmar dressed in traditional Burmese clothes and performed Burmese dances. Baltimore police officers assigned to patrol during the camp joined the festivities, playing Duck, Duck, Goose with the children and helping with crafts. Soon the partner churches were dreaming about how to increase their collaborative efforts.

For this fall, the coalition of churches and neighborhood leaders has planned an outing for the children of Harlem Avenue to the Negro Baseball League Museum in Owings Mills, Maryland, a "trunk or treat" Halloween event, and a parents' night out at Hunting Ridge. And of course everyone is already talking about next summer's Bible camp.

CC

## Murmuration

Cold morning, November, taking a walk,  
when suddenly, up ahead, the trees unleave,  
and thousands of starlings lift off, an immense  
river of noise; they braid and unbraid themselves  
over my head, the gray silk sky embroidered  
with black kisses, the whoosh of their wings,  
their chattering clatter, patterns broken/formed/  
reformed, a scarf of ragged ribbons. Dumb-  
struck, mouth open, I say *holy* and I say *moly*.  
And then, they're gone.

**Barbara Crooker**



## Scholar finds oldest KJV draft

**F**or about a month after he returned from England last year, a New Jersey university professor did not realize what a treasure he had found in a rare books library abroad.

At Cambridge University, Jeffrey A. Miller, an assistant professor of English at Montclair State University, had acquainted himself with some of the 70 pages of a notebook that had belonged to Samuel Ward, a 17th-century biblical scholar. But it wasn't until Miller returned home, and made a more thorough study of photographs he had taken of its pages, that he understood how stunning a discovery he had made.

The notebook held draft portions of the King James Version of the Bible, which was published in 1611 and named for the newly ascended King James I.

"I am not even sure I believed it initially," said Miller, describing the moment when he figured out he had seen draft pages from the most widely read work in the English language.

"It seems beyond belief to think you could be looking at a draft of the King James Bible, much less a draft unlike any other draft that we previously had, much less the earliest draft of the King James Bible," he said.

Jonathan Greenberg, deputy chair of the English department at Montclair State, said, "One of the most amazing things about the discovery is that in a certain sense this draft was hiding in plain sight."

It is not likely that many scholars had been clamoring to look at Ward's archives, Greenberg said. He credited Miller's expertise and persistence for bringing the now-prized pages to light.

"The draft was there for hundreds of years, but no one had realized exactly what it was," he said.

In the months after the discovery, scholars of the KJV confirmed Miller's find.

Miller, who specializes in early modern literature, history, and theology, had set out for Cambridge in hopes of learning more about Ward. The professor had agreed to write an essay on Ward for a book about the several dozen men charged with producing the KJV by the Church of England, which had grouped the men into "companies."

So Miller went to Sidney Sussex College, within Cambridge University, whose archives contain many of Ward's papers.

"I was maximally hoping to find some letter that he had written that seemed relevant," Miller said. "I did find that."

But he also found the notebook, cataloged in the 1980s as "a verse-by-verse

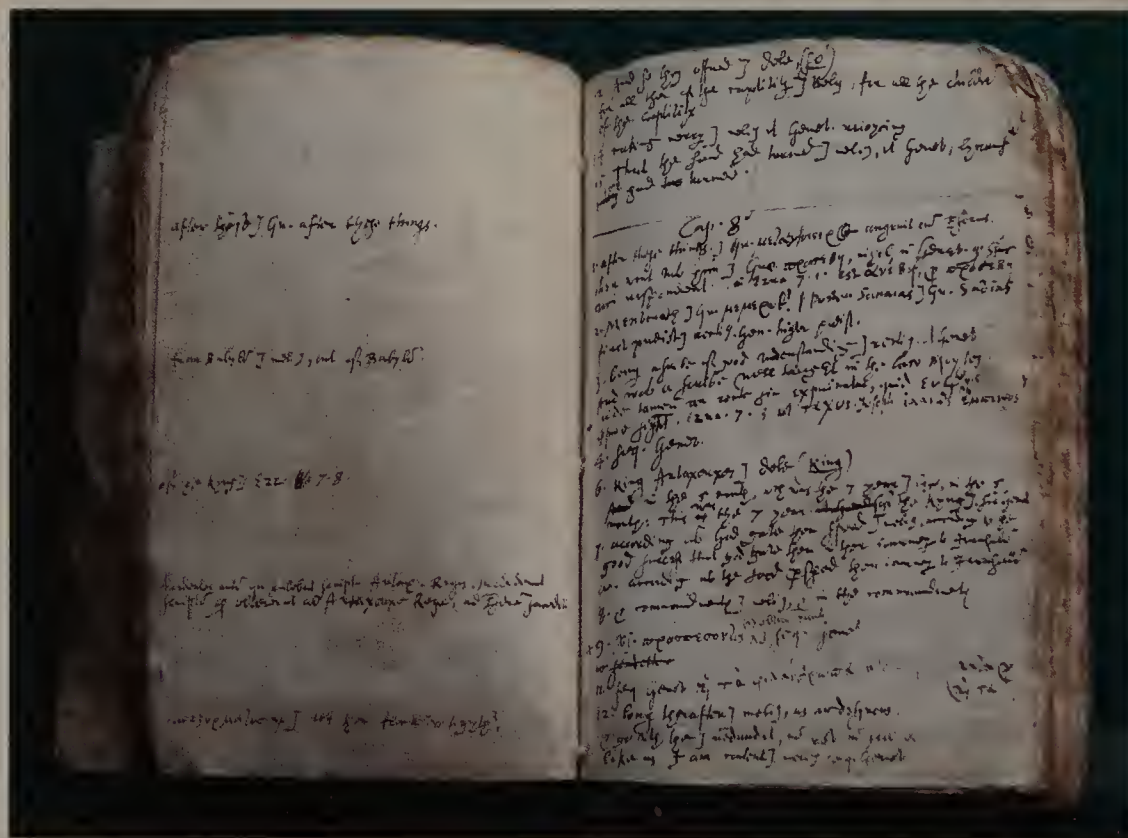
biblical commentary" with "Greek word studies and some Hebrew notes."

"Let's have a look at this," Miller thought of the paperback-size book, whose pages date from 1604 to 1608.

Eventually, Miller came to understand that some of the pages were Ward's draft of a part of the KJV. Miller saw an entire draft of 1 Esdras and a partial draft of the book known as the Wisdom of Solomon, both from the Apocrypha.

The professor made his findings public October 14 in an article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, in which he explains that the King James Bible, organized as a group endeavor, may have been more the product of individuals than previously thought.

"It's really the first real solid evidence for that," Miller said.



**FIRST DRAFT:** A scholar recently identified the pictured documents, which are Samuel Ward's draft translation of 1 Esdras, as the earliest work on the King James Bible.



While very few drafts—and no complete drafts—of the KJV have been found, Miller's discovery is the first that can be attributed to a particular translator. Further study, he said, will shed light not only on the KJV but also on the English language it helped shape.

"The King James Bible is a monument of English religion, literature, and the language itself," he said, and it's important to understand how it was built. "It didn't just fall out of the sky." —Lauren Markoe, Religion News Service

## Black churches in St. Louis area damaged by fire, arson suspected

**FIRES DAMAGED** several churches—of different denominations, but all with predominantly black congregations—within a few miles of one another in northwest St. Louis and nearby suburbs within weeks in October.

Captain Garon Mosby of the St. Louis Fire Department said the fires, set near each church's front doors, were caused by arson, according to news reports.

One of the churches damaged by fire was New Life Missionary Baptist Church in St. Louis's Walnut Park East neighborhood, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported.

David Triggs, pastor of New Life, told the *Post-Dispatch* that he was troubled that the five churches affected are all predominantly black.

"This was done by the mind of someone who is spiritually sick," Triggs said of the fire at his church.

The church held its Sunday service on the lawn October 18, the day after the fire, the *Post-Dispatch* reported. The New Testament reading that day was from 1 Peter 4, which in the King James translation speaks of "the fiery trial which is to try you" and exhorts believers to rejoice in partaking in Christ's sufferings.

After a series of fires damaged several black churches in the South this summer, Christ Church Cathedral in St. Louis, an Episcopal congregation, organized the Rebuild the Churches Fund.

The fund raised more than \$700,000 through special collections from nearly 300 Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and other congregations. Organizers were in the process of preparing disbursement

checks when the blazes occurred in the St. Louis area, said Michael D. Kinman, dean of Christ Church Cathedral.

Kinman and other cathedral staff contacted the pastors of the churches damaged by fire—also including Catholic, Lutheran, and Pentecostal congregations—asking, "How can we as a community rally around you?"

They inquired about the extent of the damage and whether there were costs not covered by insurance, as well as other needs.

"We want to make sure that the communities that have been hurt are the ones that get to determine their need," Kinman said.

Roderick K. Burton, from a Missionary Baptist congregation, asked for prayer support. Christ Church Cathedral offered to have people attend that church's regular Wednesday prayer meeting "as a sign of solidarity," Kinman said. Burton then opened the invitation to the whole city.

While investigators have worked in each case to learn the cause of the fires in the South and the St. Louis area, this interfaith effort sought to send a message that the acts of arson are unacceptable, Kinman said. And the Rebuild the Churches Fund plans to stay in touch with congregations through the rebuilding process.

"When you attack the church in the black community you attack the heart of the black community, and this is just something we can't stand for," Kinman said. "We want to make it clear that the power of hate to burn down is nothing compared to the power of love to rebuild." —Celeste Kennel-Shank, the *CHRISTIAN CENTURY*

## California law allows aid in dying for terminally ill

After California approved a law allowing the terminally ill to end their lives, joining several other states authorizing that decision, the choice is now available to nearly one in six Americans.

When signing the California law, Gov. Jerry Brown, a former Catholic seminarian, said that he carefully considered arguments on both sides.

"I do not know what I would do if I were dying in prolonged and excruciating pain," Brown said. "I am certain, however, that it would be a comfort to be able to consider the options afforded by this bill. And I wouldn't deny that right to others."

The new law, which takes effect January 1, makes it a felony to pressure anyone to request or take a lethal prescription.

While states such as New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts are expected to take up similar proposals in upcoming sessions, the issue remains divisive. (A Montana court decision protects doctors who write lethal prescriptions, and a New Mexico case is under appeal.)

In fact, California's new law could mobilize the opposition, especially faith groups and disability rights organizations who say that such measures disproportionately disadvantage the most vulnerable and marginalized in society.

The states that have laws on assisted dying—including Washington, Oregon, and Vermont—tend to be seen as "out of step with mainstream America," said James Hoefler, a political scientist at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, who specializes in end-of-life issues. California is "just not what people look to as the tipping point in this discussion."

The California law is modeled closely after Oregon's 1997 law. By giving patients the opportunity to make choices about their care that minimize suffering, the new law "begins to approximate legislation in more progressive jurisdictions around the globe," said Christopher Riddle, director of the Applied Ethics



Institute at Utica College in Utica, New York.

But critics say that several powerful factors make such laws problematic.

Eugene Rivers, president of the Seymour Institute for Black Church and Policy Studies in Boston, said physician-assisted dying has a disproportionate impact on poor black and brown communities.

"The passage of the assisted-suicide bill can serve to be a wake-up call to people of faith who are committed to protecting the sanctity of human life," he wrote in an e-mail.

There are long-standing concerns that assistance in dying would be offered in lieu of care, especially for vulnerable populations.

Still, there has been no evidence of abuses in any of the states with aid-in-dying laws in place, Hoeffler said.

In fact, he says, the opposite has occurred. "Those taking advantage of assisted suicide tend to be white, well insured, well educated, and well cared for," he said. (Some 93 percent of those asking for aid in dying in Oregon last year were enrolled in hospice.)

In its 2014 annual report, Oregon's Public Health Division finds that "pain and suffering" is not the main reason patients in that state turn to ending their lives. The top-ranked reasons were loss

of autonomy, decreasing ability to participate in activities, and loss of dignity. Pain and suffering ranked sixth.

"These are social and cultural reasons that, in our youth-worshiping culture, I want to challenge," said Fordham University bioethicist Charles Camosy, citing the Oregon report.

It is telling that the California law passed during a special legislative session called to debate the costs of the state's health-care program, Camosy said.

The classic progressive view is that "society should protect the poor and vulnerable," he said, and any decision to support right-to-die legislation represents movement in the wrong direction.

In September, British parliamentarians rejected a bill, 330–118, that would have allowed people with less than six months to live to end their life legally.

A letter written by Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby and signed by representatives of the Roman Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, and Sikh faiths said that the bill crossed "a legal and ethical Rubicon."

During the debate on the legislation in 2014, Desmond Tutu, Anglican archbishop emeritus of Cape Town, South Africa, spoke in favor of assisted dying. He distinguished suicide—"a premature death often accompanied by mental instability"—from the choice to die because of low quality of life even with good palliative care options. "I revere the sanctity of life—but not at any cost," he wrote in an essay published by the *Guardian*. —Gloria Goodale, *The Christian Science Monitor*; Cathy Lynn Grossman and Trevor Grundy, Religion News Service; added sources

## U.S., Canadian denominations sign full communion agreement

**TWO OF** North America's most liberal Protestant church groups have agreed to recognize each other's members, ministers, and sacraments.

The United Church of Christ and the United Church of Canada celebrated their full communion agreement October 17 at a church in Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada. Leaders from the two denominations signed the agreement during the service.

Karen Georgia A. Thompson, ecumenical and interfaith officer of the United Church of Christ, said the ceremony's location near the Canadian-U.S. border symbolizes the groups' desire to work together.

"It shows unity through international lines," she said.

Full communion also means the two denominations will share a commitment to mission. Both church groups have supported social justice work, ordination of women, and inclusion of LGBT people.

Bruce Gregersen, senior adviser of theology and faith for the United Church of Canada, told the United

Church of Christ news service that the agreement "has touched something of deep significance in the church and we're excited about what it will mean into the future. We are not alone, as our Creed says."

The United Church of Canada, the country's largest Protestant denomination, has recently been embroiled in a controversy over a suburban Toronto pastor who is an atheist. Leaders of the Canadian church are reviewing the ordination of Gretta Vosper, author of *With or Without God*, and her supporters have mounted a letter-writing and fundraising campaign.

The United Church of Canada has about 3 million members in more than 3,500 congregations. The United Church of Christ has close to 1 million members, with 5,100 U.S. churches.

The United Church of Christ has full communion agreements with three other denominations; this is the first for the United Church of Canada. —Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service; added sources

PHOTO COURTESY OF COMPASSION & CHOICES



**RIGHT-TO-DIE CAMPAIGN:** Toni Broaddus, California campaign director for Compassion & Choices, at the microphone, and Dan Diaz, holding a photo of his late wife, Brittany Maynard, have been among the advocates of physician-assisted dying. Senate majority leader Bill Monning (left) and Senate majority whip Lois Wolk (right) were among the state legislators who sponsored the bill that became law in California.



## Pentecostal Christianity is a top Nigerian export

The roads that wind north from Lagos, Nigeria, toward the headquarters of the Winners' Chapel megachurch are lined with businesses such as Amazing Grace Hair Salon, No King But God Driving School, and My God Is Able Furniture Makers. And wedged between these businesses are the churches themselves, hundreds of them, in sweltering tin shacks or rooms above a gas station, in the parking lot of half-finished shopping malls or perched on stilts atop Lagos's viscous lagoon.

Canaanland, the Winners' Chapel headquarters, spreads across 10,500 acres. It includes not only the 50,000-seat Faith Tabernacle but a company town complete with schools and a university, a bottled-water processing plant, restaurants, shops, and residential neighborhoods. Every weekend, busloads of Nigerians wearing vividly patterned tailor-made suits and dresses pour through its gates for the Sunday service.

"The next two months will be the greatest two months of your life to date," David Oyedepo, the church's leader, told the crowd at Faith Tabernacle on a recent Sunday morning. His voice carries through the packed chapel and out to an overflow area, where thousands of additional worshipers sit on plastic chairs, fanning themselves. "Your struggle has finally come to an end!"

Few countries illustrate the changing dynamics of religion in the Global South in recent decades—and its international evangelistic efforts—better than Nigeria. Today, there are only six countries worldwide that have more Christians than Nigeria's nearly 100 million.

And some 1.2 million Nigerians currently live abroad, according to the United Nations. (Some put the figure as high as 17 million.) Over the past three decades, Nigerian Pentecostal megachurches have sprung up from the shantytowns of Sierra Leone to the strip malls of Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Britain's fastest-growing church is the Nigerian Redeemed Christian Church of God, and Nigerians founded four of that



PHOTO BY NIGEL COX VIA CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE

**CHURCH EXPORT:** *The Redeemed Christian Church of God, established in Nigeria in 1952, is Britain's fastest-growing church, with congregations such as this one in Dartford, Kent.*

country's ten largest churches. In Kiev, Ukraine, a city awash in onion-domed Orthodox cathedrals, the largest Sunday service—with about 5,000 people attending—is conducted by Sunday Adelaja, founder of the Pentecostal Embassy of God church and a Nigerian.

"Traditionally churches came from the Western world, but now we are returning the kingdom back to them," said Tope Olukole, a spokesman for Winners' Chapel, which is also known as the Living Faith Church Worldwide. "With science, with modernization, the West has lost its debt to Christ, but in Africa the faith is still strong."

Although Nigerians have left an imprint on most of the world's major Christian denominations—one-quarter of the globe's Anglicans live in Nigeria, for instance—their most exported version of the faith is Pentecostal.

With no central authority, Pentecostalism indeed seems ideally suited to a country like Nigeria, a place steeped in entrepreneurship after decades of unreliable government.

Social and economic changes have seized the country—and the African continent—over the past half-century. Among the most important pieces of the puzzle is the growth of cities. On the eve of Nigeria's independence from Britain in 1960, Lagos, the largest city, had a population of a quarter million. Today, 20 million people live there, with 6,000 new migrants arriving daily.

That's where churches come in, said Maria Frahm-Arp, a lecturer at the University of Johannesburg who studies

Pentecostal churches in Africa. Churches provide community to migrants, and in countries like Nigeria they are often a far more reliable safety net than government-provided social services, she said.

"Megachurches often offer a great deal of social teachings—how to make it in the world—that are practically valuable to migrants," she said. "And beyond that people are often using church networks to access jobs and build social ties in new places."

But if churches seem to spring up like dandelions in the cities of Lagos, Ibadan, and Abuja, the country's evangelists are also looking further afield. Winners' Chapel, for instance, claims membership on five continents, and the Redeemed Christian Church of God—Nigeria's largest Pentecostal church—has adherents in more than 100 countries. RCCG says its goal is to build a church within a five-minute walk or drive of every person on earth.

That migration of people is highly visible in cities like Johannesburg, where a stadium service led by RCCG's leader, Enoch Adeboye, can draw thousands of worshipers. (Adeboye once described RCCG as "made in heaven, assembled in Nigeria, exported to the world.")

In a Colorado Springs strip mall, RCCG's Living Faith Sanctuary sits between a bargain housewares shop and a marijuana dispensary. On one Sunday, about 70 worshipers gathered for a sermon by Michael Lipede, who shares the national origin of more than half of his congregants.

"You can't separate faith from culture, so in a way churches are always going to be cultural centers," said Charles, a Nigerian engineer who recently moved to Colorado (he gave only his first name). When he arrived in the U.S., one of the first things Charles did was find a Nigerian church—RCCG.

The churches are making inroads into their communities as well. At Living Faith Sanctuary, about a quarter of the worshipers are locals. Charles noted that "almost everyone" who visits the church's small food pantry for assistance is "a white person from here."

"The church has an obligation to be an open house of worship above all else," he said. —Ryan Lenora Brown, *The Christian Science Monitor*



## Boko Haram bombs civilians while Nigerian military is criticized for abuses

Boko Haram attacks in recent months, including one at a mosque as evening prayer began, are increasingly using suicide bombers to target civilians, a new strategy that the Nigerian military says shows the group's weakness.

Addressing the nation October 1 to mark 55 years of independence, President Muhammadu Buhari said Boko Haram's bombing tactics were "indicative of their cowardice and desperation."

The insurgents have kidnapped an estimated 2,000 females since 2009, according to Human Rights Watch, including more than 200 schoolgirls from Chibok in April 2014.

In his inauguration speech in May, Buhari vowed to rescue the Chibok girls. Since then, hundreds of women and children have been freed, but the Chibok girls remain in captivity.

"They should set up mechanisms that people can use to report," said Aisha Yesufu, leader of the Bring Back Our Girls campaign. "Even if it is a simple line that people can call into and report suspicious activities before they actually happen."

More than 1,000 people have been killed since Buhari was elected in March to lead Africa's most populous country and largest economy. He pledged to wipe out Boko Haram, which is believed responsible for the deaths of about 20,000 people since 2009. At least 2.1 million people have been displaced by the fighting.

For Nigeria and its allies, Buhari is key to Nigeria's ability to turn the corner on a range of issues, especially its efforts against Boko Haram.

But despite the goodwill, Buhari quickly ran into a challenge over human rights and the conduct of the Nigerian forces tasked with combatting the insurgency. This summer, Amnesty International released a detailed report accusing the Nigerian army of killing about 8,000 civilians during its campaign against Boko Haram and accusing sev-

eral senior officers of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The Amnesty report alleged that the military had detained more than 20,000 people in brutal conditions that led to numerous deaths. "Former detainees and senior military sources described how detainees were regularly tortured," it said.

The Ministry of Defense denounced the Amnesty report and claimed the organization was trying to "blackmail" the military elite.

Buhari's spokesman Garbu Shehu said the president had received the report, according to Nigerian media.

"Respect for human rights and adherence to the rule of law are the life and soul of the democratic system," Buhari said, according to Shehu. "We will not tolerate or condone . . . reckless disregard for human rights."

A point of contention between Nigeria and the U.S. in the past was America's refusal to supply weapons to Nigeria's army because of the latter's poor human rights record.

The *New York Times* reported that in the summer of 2014, "the United States blocked the sale of American-made Cobra attack helicopters to Nigeria from Israel, amid concerns in Washington about Nigeria's ability to use and maintain that type of helicopter in its effort against Boko Haram, and continuing worries about Nigeria's protection of civilians when conducting military operations." —Paula Rogo, *The Christian Science Monitor*

## Canadian court rules in favor of woman wearing niqab in citizenship ritual

A Canadian court has cleared the way for a Muslim woman to wear her face veil, or niqab, while taking the oath of citizenship.

The Federal Court of Appeal in October refused to suspend its previous ruling that the government may not bar Zunera Ishaq from covering her face when becoming a Canadian citizen.

The judge said she found that the government had not demonstrated that refusing the stay "would result in irreparable harm to the public interest."

The ruling is the third legal defeat for Canada's Conservative government on the niqab, which was a hot-button issue in the October 19 federal election.

In his campaign, Prime Minister Stephen Harper supported the niqab ban. The issue whipped up much debate about identity politics and the targeting of Muslims. Harper lost to the candidate of the Liberal Party of Canada, Justin Trudeau.

Ottawa's policy dates to 2011, when then-immigration minister Jason Kenney announced a ban on face coverings during citizenship ceremonies to ensure that new citizens were reciting the oath and because saying the oath is a "quintessentially public act." But documents have shown that Kenney proceeded with the ban despite advice from his own department that religious beliefs should be accommodated in cases where "no security reasons exist."

Ishaq challenged the policy, and in February the Federal Court ruled that the ban was unlawful because it conflicts with regulations in the Citizenship Act that stress respect for religion.

The court also pointed out that any changes to the oath ceremony must be approved by the cabinet. Ottawa appealed.

In September, the appeals court upheld the earlier ruling and issued its decision promptly, saying it wanted Ishaq to obtain citizenship in time to vote.

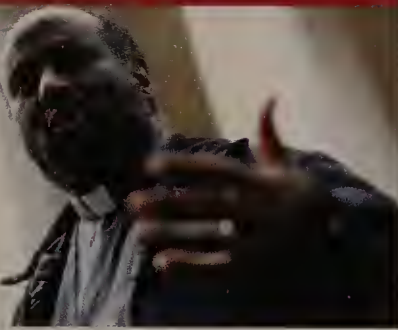
The government then appealed to the Supreme Court of Canada and meantime asked for a stay of the ruling, which was denied.

Ishaq, 29, came to Canada from Pakistan in 2008 and has worn a niqab since she was 15. She refused to take part in a 2011 citizenship ceremony because she would have to show her face.

"I am pleased that the courts have reaffirmed my right to citizenship and to vote," Ishaq said in a statement. The issue "has nothing to do with identity and everything to do with my right—and the right of all Canadians—to think, believe, and dress without government interference." —Ron Csillag, Religion News Service



## People



■ **Mussie Zerai** was once a refugee. Now the 40-year-old Roman Catholic priest from Eritrea runs a center that receives calls from distressed migrants who have fled their countries in hopes of a better life in Europe. Through Agenzia Habeshia, the charitable trust he set up in 2006 to campaign for refugee rights in North Africa and to help others in Italy get asylum, Zerai has saved thousands of lives.

The little-known priest, now based in Rome and Switzerland, was among the nominees for the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize. (It was awarded in October to the National Dialogue Quartet, which helped build a pluralistic democracy in Tunisia.)

Zerai said in a telephone interview that being nominated was a reward.

"Above all, it is a recognition of the seriousness of the situation of the refugees coming from sub-Saharan Africa," he said.

Zerai, who was born in Asmara, Eritrea's capital, became a refugee at age 17 and migrated to Italy. There he became involved in human rights campaigns while studying theology and social morality.

In 2003, he gave his phone number to migrants after helping an Italian journalist interview refugees in prison in Libya. From then on, migrants have spread the word to call Zerai's number for help.

When he receives the calls, the priest finds the GPS coordinates of the caller's phone and then shares them with the Italian and Maltese coast guard in the Mediterranean Sea so that they can launch rescue operations.

Zerai is pushing for a "humanitarian corridor," a safe route of passage for migrants so that they can obtain visas in European countries. He recalled an SOS he received in 2011 from a boat with 72 migrants that had drifted out to sea without food, medicine, or water.

"It took 15 days for rescuers to arrive; by this time about 90 percent of the

migrants had died," said Zerai, calling it one of the lowest moments in his life. "I am still pursuing justice for these migrants, because I think it is NATO's role to protect the migrants."

African governments must also make greater efforts to protect children and grant more freedoms, he said.

"The migration will only end when there is more justice, less corruption, and [less] abuse of power that oppresses the masses for the benefit of [the] few in power or the rich who buy the power," he said. —Fredrick Nzwili, Religion News Service

■ **James B. Nelson**, an author and scholar of Christian ethics in the United Church of Christ, died October 15 in Tucson, Arizona, at age 85.

Nelson took part in the civil rights and anti-war movements in the 1960s and championed LGBT rights beginning in the 1970s.

"His groundbreaking work on human sexuality and ethics helped set the stage for a United Church ready to become open and affirming," said John C. Dorhauer, UCC general minister and president. "He helped us understand that sexual expression and intimacy were gifts of the sacred. He was ahead of his time, and endured much abuse and vitriol."

Nelson was born in Windom, Minnesota, and earned degrees from Macalester College in St. Paul and Yale University. He was ordained in the UCC and served as a pastor in Connecticut and South Dakota before joining the faculty of United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities in Minnesota in 1963. He taught there for 35 years.

Nelson wrote 12 books and had one in progress at the time of his death.

He was perhaps best known for his 1978 book *Embodiment*. In "Reuniting Sexuality and Spirituality," a 1987 article for the CHRISTIAN CENTURY, he wrote about how the period after the sexual revolution of the 1960s and '70s saw a shift away from "understanding sexual sin as a matter of wrong sexual acts."

Instead, he wrote: "Sexual sin lies in the dualistic alienation by which the body becomes an object, either to be constrained out of fear (the Victorian approach) or to

be treated as a pleasure machine (the *Playboy* philosophy). It lies in the dualistic alienation by which females are kept from claiming their assertiveness and males kept from claiming their vulnerability."

Nelson was also open about his struggle with alcoholism, including in his 2004 book *Thirst*. He described himself in a 2007 CENTURY article about addiction as "a Christian ethicist (retired) and a recovering alcoholic (from which there is no retirement)." —Connie Larkman, UCNews; the CHRISTIAN CENTURY staff

■ **Mark Juergensmeyer**, past president of the American Academy of Religion, withdrew from a symposium on law and religion at Brigham Young University after learning of BYU's policy toward Mormon students who change their faith.

Juergensmeyer, author of *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* and a professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, had received an e-mail from the Free BYU organization. The group contacted all the symposium speakers to inform them of BYU's policy that students who enter the university as Mormons but move away from the faith can be expelled, evicted from student housing, and fired from on-campus jobs.

"I could not speak at a conference that is devoted in part to religious freedom at an institution that seemed to be denying that freedom to its own students," Juergensmeyer said. "One of the conference organizers expressed support for my decision as a matter of conscience, but she also gave a spirited defense of the university's policy, in part for financial reasons, since so much of the tuition comes from the offerings of the church."

Juergensmeyer said he has not heard of a comparable policy at any other religious university in the United States but that he has not made a particular study of the question.

"I mean no disrespect to BYU, the faculty, or the Mormon church," he said. "I would not participate in a religious freedom conference at any institution where this would be a policy." —Jana Riess, Religion News Service



PHOTO BY STAN WALDHÄUSER



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARK JUERGENSMAYER



# LIVING BY The Word

November 15, 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Mark 13:1–8

**STRUCTURALLY**, this week's Gospel passage divides into two sections: Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple (v. 1–2) and his discourse concerning the apocalyptic woes ahead for the nation of Israel (3–8). The first part responds to a comment by an unnamed disciple, while the second begins to answer the two questions posed privately by the inner group of Peter, James, John, and Andrew.

"As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!'" The Jerusalem temple, newly reconstructed by Herod the Great at great expense, was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The project began about 20 years before the birth of Jesus, and the inner sanctuary was completed quickly (in about 18 months, according to the Jewish historian Josephus, who provides us with detailed descriptions of the main building, the outer buildings, and their contents). But the temple took many more years to complete.

It occupied a platform of more than 900 by 1,500 feet—twice as large as the Roman Forum with its many temples and four times as large as the Athenian Acropolis with its Parthenon. The huge retaining walls that supported the temple were composed of great white stones as long as 40 feet, some of which still stand as part of the Western Wall.

The front of the temple itself was a huge square (150 feet each way), much of it decorated with silver and gold. Josephus reports that Herod used so much gold to cover the outside walls of the temple that, in the bright sunlight, it nearly blinded anyone who looked at it. The combination of the temple mount, the platform of huge retaining stones, and the large stones of the temple itself raised the temple complex to a height that could be seen from miles away by pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem to worship there.

The unnamed disciple, perhaps a peasant from rural Galilee, would have been impressed not only by the temple's splendor, but by what it represented: the dwelling place of God at the center of the known world, the symbol of God's presence with Israel. So Jesus' reply must have astounded him: "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

This prophecy of the temple's complete destruction may well go back to the Jesus of history, since it exists in the New Testament in a variety of forms and contexts. In John 2:19 it is associated with Jesus' body; in Acts 6:14 it is part of the charge against Stephen. In Mark's Gospel, it is important to notice

what Jesus actually says—and to distinguish between his words and those of the false witnesses at Jesus' trial (14:57–58) and the people who taunt him at his crucifixion (15:29), saying that he said he himself would destroy the temple and build another one in three days. Mark's Jesus uses what is probably a divine passive, predicting that God would allow the destruction of the holiest place in Israel.

This was hardly a new idea. Jeremiah and Micah had prophesied the Babylonians' destruction of the first temple. And according to Talmudic tradition, Jesus' contemporary Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai prophesied the second temple's destruction 40 years before it was burned and razed to the ground by the Romans in 70 CE. It is very probable that Jesus said something about the destruction of the temple that, perhaps in garbled form, sounded like blasphemy to his Jewish contemporaries.

This very public statement is followed by a private moment between Jesus and the inner circle of his disciples, the first four to be called (1:16–20), listed first among the 12 (3:16–17). Jesus sits, the typical posture for teaching, on the Mount of Olives, opposite the temple. Much has been made of Mark's "theological geography," and it is evident here: Jesus is opposing the temple leadership and its commercial practices (11:15–19), and he does so in the name of the Lord, who, as Malachi predicted, would "suddenly come to his temple" in judgment (Mal. 3:1–2). Also important is Zechariah 14:1–5, which links the Lord's coming to the Mount of Olives with judgment against Jerusalem.

The disciples ask Jesus two questions: "When will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" The rest of chapter 13 consists of a long apocalyptic discourse by way of answers to these two questions, in reverse order. Jesus responds to the request for a sign by describing "the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be" (13:14) and by drawing a lesson from the fig tree (13:28). His answer to when this will be comes at the end: "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father," followed by the warning to "keep awake" in the meantime.

Before Jesus addresses the disciples' questions, he makes a prediction that reminds me of the film *The Road*. He warns the disciples that false messiahs (*christs* in the Greek) will come and "lead many astray." They will spread false rumors of wars to alarm people; there will also be real wars, earthquakes, and famines. All this is but the beginning of the end: the end of the age that is passing away and the birth pangs of the new creation that is being born. It will be a time to trust in God alone.



# Reflections on the lectionary

*November 22, Reign of Christ*  
*John 18:33–37*

**OF THE FOUR GOSPELS**, John provides the most detailed account of the encounter between Jesus and Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator (governor) of Judea from about 26 to 36 CE, when he was recalled to Rome for trial for cruelty and oppression. His callousness was legendary: if you could choose your judge, you would not want Pontius Pilate.

Jesus cannot choose. As John describes it, he is caught between a rock and a hard place. Complex power dynamics existed between the Judean religious leaders and the Roman procurator, who had the power to pronounce the death sentence. Passover, the annual celebration of Israel's liberation from slavery, God's victory over Pharaoh, was always politically explosive. You never knew when some Galilean hothead would stir up riots against the hated Romans.

Pilate's job was to make sure that did not happen. He always brought in extra military power to handle the large crowds of Passover pilgrims coming to the temple. The presence of Roman legions, along with his own no-nonsense reputation, had generally done the job.

In recent years, Jewish and Christian scholars have collaborated to reach a better understanding of the events of the passion narratives in the Gospels—and in John's Gospel in particular, because of its polemical language about “the Jews.” It is important to stress how difficult it is to recover, many centuries later, with almost no written materials that could be characterized as unbiased, the events leading up to Jesus' death under Pilate.

This Gospel was written when emerging Christianity and emerging Pharisaism were rival versions of Judaism, one of which believed that God's Messiah had come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the other of which doubted that God's Messiah would die on a cross and did not see any signs of the messianic age present since the coming of Jesus. So they disagreed, sometimes bitterly, about these matters, a theological disagreement that colored the way historical events were remembered. What we have in John's passion narrative is a complex entanglement of theological and political reflection, written in the context of a highly charged argument between a local Christian community and the synagogue down the street.

Nevertheless, if it is possible to bracket some of these historical questions, it may also be possible to appreciate the subtlety of John's account of the meeting between Jesus and Pilate. John's Gospel—perhaps surprisingly for the “spiritual gospel”—exposes both the hypocrisy of the religious leaders preparing to celebrate the Passover according to the law of Moses and the hypocrisy of

Pontius Pilate, who, in theory at least, stands for the grandeur of Roman law in which criminal justice is not perverted by mob rule.

To do this, the evangelist constructs a seven-scene play in 18:28–19:16. It all happens at the Praetorium, Pilate's headquarters, which includes the governor's residence, military barracks, and an outdoor courtyard used as a court of judgment. There, at least as John tells it, two worlds collide. Outside are Judean religious leaders who want Jesus killed but lack the power to do it themselves under Roman rule; inside is Pilate's prisoner, brought early that morning from Caiaphas. Outside the religious leaders and crowds shout their demands up to Pilate; inside Pilate and Jesus engage in rational, even philosophical discourse. John shows Pilate's indecision by having him move back and forth between the two worlds: outside and inside, outside and inside.

At the end of the seven scenes, the Judean religious leaders—who do not enter the Praetorium, so as not to defile themselves ritually—end up saying, “We have no king but Caesar,” probably John's allusion to a Passover hymn that says to God, “We have no king but Thee.” They have, in effect, defiled themselves anyway. And Pilate, who at the beginning insisted that serious charges be brought and proved, caves to pressure to kill a man of whom he himself has said three times, “I find no case against him.” So Roman “justice” is exposed for the farce it is.

This week's passage occurs in the second scene, inside the Praetorium. The first conversation between Pilate and Jesus does not go well. Pilate asks, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Some commentaries stress *you*, reflecting a tradition that Pilate is not impressed by Jesus' appearance. Perhaps Jesus isn't much to look at, or perhaps this insult is a form of intimidation.

Jesus answers Pilate's question with a question: where did he get his information? Pilate implies that others have told him about Jesus. Why should he care? He's not Jewish. He asks, “What have you done?” Jesus again does not answer Pilate's question, instead stating twice that his kingdom is not from this world: if it were, his followers would be fighting for him.

Pilate, who only knows of one world, can hardly appreciate Jesus' argument, but he grabs hold of what he can understand: “So you *are* a king?”

Once again, Jesus and Pilate are talking past each other: Jesus responds, “*You* say that I am a king.” The implication: what *I* say about myself is, “for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

Although the assigned reading ends here, some preachers will want to add the first part of verse 38, Pilate's question—is it bored? frustrated? cynical? disgusted? curious?—“What is truth?”

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*The author is A. Katherine Grieb, professor of biblical interpretation and New Testament at Virginia Theological Seminary.*



# How wide is God's mercy?

by Charles Hefling

YEAR AFTER YEAR, as students of mine worked their way through the *Divine Comedy*, they found it strange—magnificently strange at times, at times disturbingly so. One feature of Dante's poem that usually met with resistance is the exclusiveness of paradise. Apart from the Old Testament worthies, it is peopled with Christians only. Hell too has plenty of Christians, of course, but in their case beatitude was once a possibility, now sadly forfeited. Not so the rest of the damned. They never had even a chance. Blameless non-Christians like Virgil, Dante's guide, may be assigned to one of the less hellish circles, but they are nonetheless shut out of heaven forever.

What is wrong with this picture? As one young woman put it, "That's just not the sort of thing God would do."

Hers is an understandable reaction, which would probably be shared by many thoughtful Christian people. Somehow, they feel sure, commitment to Christianity does not commit them to believing that in the judgment of the God they worship every other tradition of religious belief and practice is worthless. Somehow, heaven cannot be a gated enclave to which only Christians are ever given a key. Somehow, "there's a wideness in God's mercy" that reaches beyond the borders of Christendom.

How, exactly? An intuitive sense that somehow God can and does save or reward or welcome persons who profess and practice religions other than Christianity is just that—a hopeful hunch. But hoping isn't enough. Christians need to have reasons for the hope that is in them (1 Pet. 3:15). That is what theology is for. It does the homely but necessary job of articulating the transition from "somehow it just has to be" to "it is so, because . . ."

What follows is a sketch of the "because."

The thesis: Perhaps religious affirmations of truth and value that are not grounded in Christianity can nevertheless be recognized as congruent with or equivalent to Christian teaching. That there exist such affirmations could be ascertained only by investigating what particular traditions actually affirm. Meanwhile, a prior question needs to be addressed: How is it that a congruence of teachings between different religions *could* exist? And addressing that question in a theologically responsible way would have to take very seriously what Christianity teaches about God.

What Christianity teaches, first and foremost, is that God are three. The relevance of God's plurality to the question at

hand lies in the distinctively Christian assertion that two of the three who are God have been sent into the created world of space and time. It is these two sendings—*missions*, as theology calls them—that give rise to the narrative by which Christians live.

One of the two missions, the advent of the eternal Son or Word of God, takes up quite a lot of the Nicene Creed: everything from "he came down from heaven" to "his kingdom will

## Surely God the Spirit was not absent prior to the coming of Christ.

have no end." About the other one, the descent of the eternal Spirit, Christian teaching has been more reticent. The New Testament is informative enough as to when the Word was made flesh and where his mission in the world was carried out. As to the coming of God the Spirit, not so much.

When, for one thing, did it begin to be true that the Spirit has in fact been sent? After the resurrection, at Pentecost? That is the liturgically conspicuous answer, but not the only one; and whether it is the right one is by no means unimportant. For it bears directly on a further question: whether the Spirit is sent only to persons who have already encountered the mission of the Word, as witnesses or through reports. Is some historical, space-and-time connection with Jesus of Nazareth necessary in order for the other divine mission to take effect?

That is the issue at stake. The first thing to say about it is that God the Spirit was surely not absent prior to the coming of Christ. True, there is not much in pre-Christian scripture about the Spirit's activity, although Genesis is often cited to confirm that the Spirit has been "the Lord, the giver of life," as the Creed says, right from the first. But the Creed also says it is Spirit who "has spoken through the

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*A former professor of theology at Boston College, Charles Hefling serves as an instructor in the program for diaconal formation of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts.*



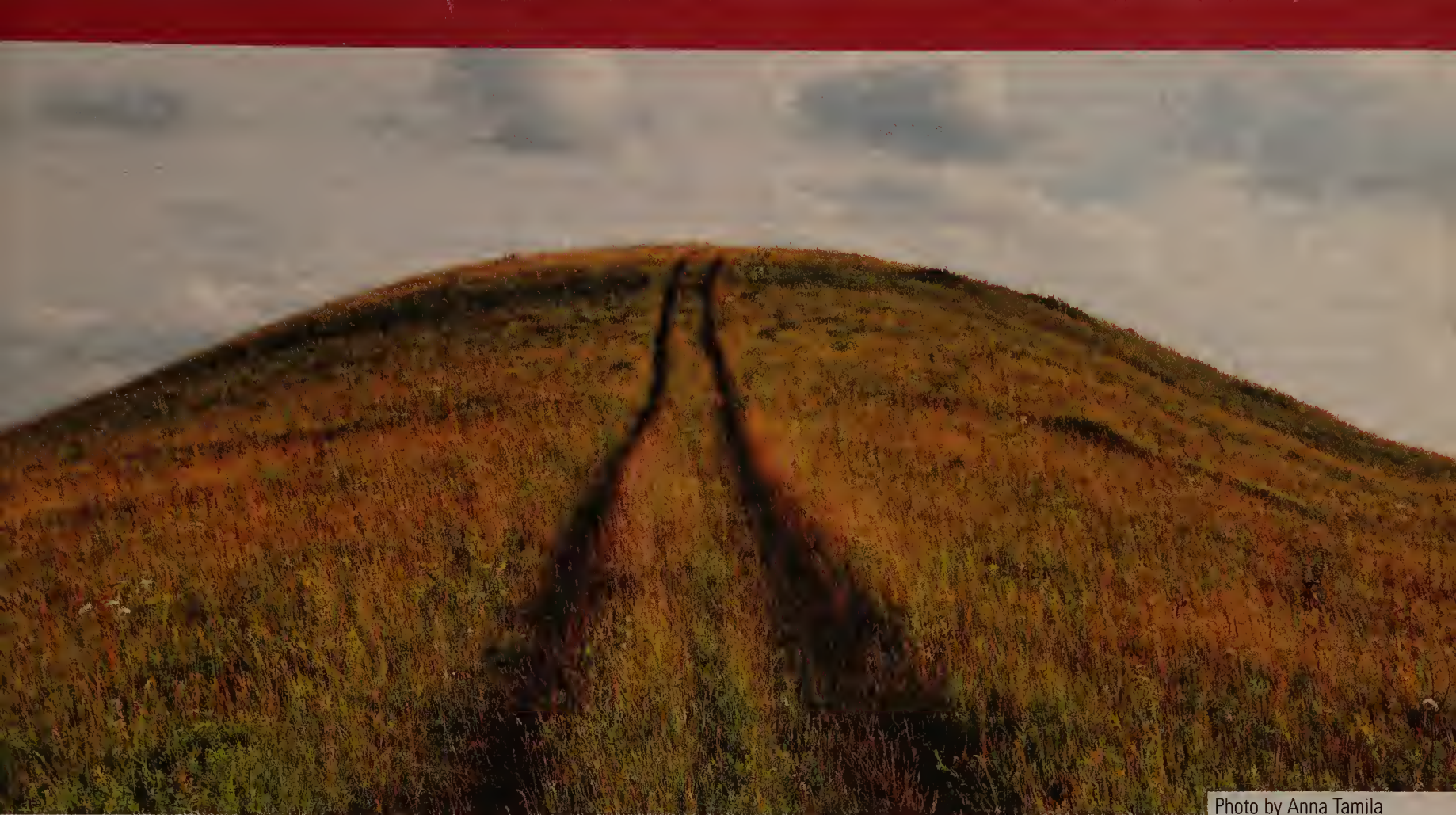


Photo by Anna Tamila

prophets,” meaning by *prophets* the likes of Amos and Isaiah, but maybe also the Christian prophets that Paul mentions. Certainly Paul includes prophecy among the “varieties of gifts” given by one and the same Spirit.

In turn, it seems clear that these particular charisms or graces or enablements are to be regarded as evidence that the Spirit not only has been but continues to be sent. If so, such spiritual endowments are not the only evidence, nor even, to Paul’s way of thinking, the most important evidence. There is a “more excellent way.” Not only are there Spirit-given gifts, each corresponding to a specific ministry; the *Spirit* is given, *is* a gift, in that “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (1 Cor. 12:4, 12:31; Rom. 5:5).

This is strong language. Paul clearly expects it to be taken seriously. What then is he talking about?

By God’s love, Paul means love *for* God. There may be, as theologians would have it, a sense in which every created being loves its Creator as best it can. But the love Paul speaks of is evidently special—a love so heart-flooding as to be commensurate with a transcendent Beloved. Such a love could only be “love divine, all loves excelling,” love that is somehow, in its own way, infinite, unrestricted, without limits or conditions, capable of bearing, hoping, enduring, believing all things, inextinguishable by death or life, height or depth, angels or principalities (1 Cor. 13:7, Rom. 8:38). And it would follow that such a love is not limited by the capacities of the lover, as human loves always are. It cannot be an achievement or a reward but only, as Paul insists, a gift pure and simple, a grace or rather *the* grace of God, grace without qualification.

The suggestion, then, is that a state of being mysteriously, awesomely, boundlessly in love with a mysterious, boundless Beloved is the primary reality within the finite world that reg-

isters and corresponds to the fact that the Spirit has been sent. The question is whether the giving of this gift is extrinsically conditioned, confined, or constrained by its recipients’ acquaintance with the Christian story. Is the scope of the Spirit’s mission, conceived as loving God with all one’s heart and mind and soul and strength, coterminous with the scope of the mission of the Son?

This much is clear: The Spirit, in Christian teaching, is Christ’s Spirit, the “other Comforter” whom he prays the Father to send. Nor is there much doubt as to whether Christ in some way committed his own mission to his followers. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). Putting two and two together, it could be argued that the apostolic job description includes mediating the Spirit. In other words, Jesus authorized certain channels—the church or the sacraments or the preaching of the gospel, as the case may be—through which God’s Spirit pours. There may be spillovers. Even Dante found two pagans in Paradise. But such exceptions, if any, are rare and probably unrecognizable, since by definition they occur outside the scope of Christian language.

So runs a well-worn argument. It is a stronger argument, theologically speaking, than simply firing off the usual proof-texts about “no other name” and the like. But it is not the only argument about how the two divine missions are related, and perhaps not the most compelling one.

Let it be granted that the mission of the Spirit does depend on God the Son, inasmuch as it is by or through the Son that the Spirit is sent. So far, Eastern and Western Christian teachings agree. That does not necessarily mean that the Spirit’s being poured out depends on the Son’s having become human or, therefore, on what he was sent to do and say



and suffer. It is surely wrong to imagine that when Christ the incarnate Word had finished doing his Father's will by preaching and teaching, founding the church, sending forth disciples, accepting the cross, and all the rest, he simply ascended into retirement. Whatever "Jesus is Lord" means, it can scarcely mean that Jesus is a titular ruler or a functionless figurehead. If he now lives and reigns, as the liturgies say, his sovereignty can perhaps best be understood as exercised in the world precisely by sending the Spirit. And that reopens the question of whom he sends the Spirit to.

A most promising way to approach that question would seem to lie in considering what God *would* do; and the only way to know that, without presuming to second-guess Omnipotence, is to be guided by the "economy" of what the God who are three in fact does. On the present argument, what God does is give, and what God gives—twice over—is God's own self. On the one hand there is the gift of his Son, given once, given for all; on the other, the gift of his Spirit, given again and again, given individually to each.

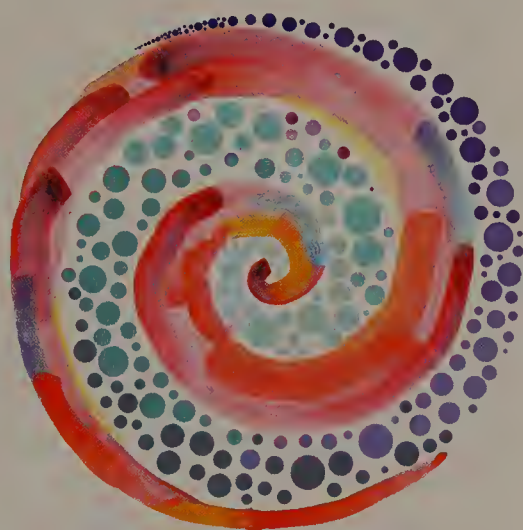
It was suggested earlier that the gift of God's Spirit consists in *agape*, that love for which English notoriously has no special word except *charity* in the old-fashioned sense: love as an existential state that is the best analogue we have for what it is to be God. Theologians have commonly said, in keeping with much of the New Testament, that charity is the *unum necessarium*, the one thing that salvation depends on above all others.

So, since God is committed to the salvation of all (1 Tim. 2:4), it does not seem unfitting to surmise that God offers, again and again, individually, to each and every one what they need if they are to turn and be saved. What they need is to be drawn out of themselves, their desires, their fears, and to have their hearts set on a good that has no ifs, ands, or buts. What they need is to love with everything they've got. What they need is to be reoriented, led from within by God in person. We are told

## Do all those led by the Spirit know who is leading them?

that all those who are so invited, led by the Spirit, are sons and daughters of God (Rom. 8:14). The crucial question is whether all those who are so led know who is leading them.

Ordinarily, you can't love someone you know nothing about. But in this case the invitation is anonymous. The Spirit, who unlike the Word has no proper name, arrives incognito. Christians, of course, claim to know something about this arrival; it was one purpose of their Lord's advent to disclose in human terms how best to respond to the gift that arrives, what



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the indwelling love of God requires of anyone who does not refuse it, what being drawn by the Father implies for human living and dying. Yet people do find themselves being moved to transcend themselves, drawn beyond themselves, grasped by ultimate concern, even when the Christian way of conceiving what they have found is faint or ill defined. They respond to strangely heart-warming love, without understanding whom they are in love with.

Perhaps, then, the same love that, in a Christian context, may be ascribed to the God-given, indwelling Spirit of God is sent and poured into the hearts of persons who have not been touched by the incarnation of the Word. To say this indeed happens is not to say these persons are “anonymous Christians,” a paradoxical and arguably patronizing term. It is, however, to say they are in principle and in effect, if not in name, lovers of the only God there is, because the only God there is has loved them first (1 John 4:19). They might be thought of as anonymous Spiritans.

To put the same point differently, it is because of this lavish bestowal of God’s self-gift that there is such a thing as religion—not only the various Christianities, but also the many more or less stable combinations of “creed, code, and cult” for which “world religions” is the conventional umbrella name.

It is true that these traditions differ, and differ widely. That should not be surprising. Every heart, metaphorical or literal, is embodied. Lovers are always at the same time products of a culture, a community, a history, a language. Their loving cannot but exemplify the customs of their own time and place. It is the same with religious love. Nor is it surprising that religions may develop in sinister ways. A religion is a program of formation, *paideia* for the *polis* of God, which aims to communicate and nurture orientation to a mysterious and awesome gift. But awe is next door to terror, and terror next door to destructiveness. As lovers are apt to be selfish and manipulative, so too religious ritual can morph into magic. Religion has been called “the only known explosive in the economy of that delicate internal-combustion engine, the human mind” (R. G. Collingwood). But engines themselves can explode, and religious loyalties can erupt in fanaticism.

All this applies to Christianity too. And none of it affects the main contention, which is that the wordless transformation for which Christians use

words like *Gift* and *Love* and *Spirit* can be, and is, welcomed and responded to under other names, and conceived in diverse contexts, because it is not in itself conveyed by any intermediary, linguistic or conceptual or imaginative. It is immediately, inwardly present, person to person.

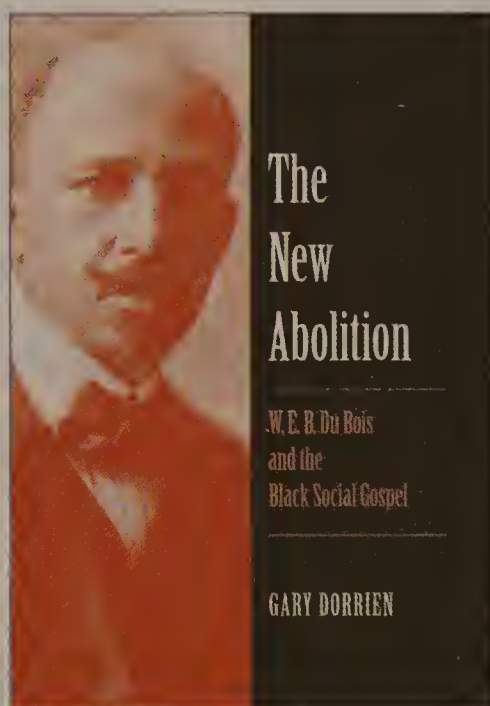
It may already be evident that the deliberately Christian conception of religion suggested here has a lot in common with accounts that base themselves on “religious experience.” That is deliberate too. The label can be misleading, unfortunately. Religious experience need not be spooky or

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## The New Abolition

*W. E. B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel*

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exotic; it need not be a once-in-a-lifetime Damascus Road event; on the contrary, it may be so intimate and subtle as to go unnoticed at first. It is usually more of a process, a gradual blossoming of compassion or self-sacrifice or mercy, than a datable outburst. There are, in the William James phrase, varieties of religious experience, just as—and because—there are varieties of personality.

The idea that the fundamental element common to all religion lies not in creed or code or cult but in consciousness, in interior experience, began to be taken seriously more than 200 years ago. It has its critics, Christian theologians among them. What should be pointed out here is that it is, in principle, verifiable. Any appeal to religious experience, the present argument included, implies that this kind of experience of *agape* really occurs. It may not always be discerned, recognized, attended to, appropriated; but it can be. It can be understood and affirmed, in the same way that one can understand and

know oneself, because it *is* one's self, in the state or process of becoming a lover.

Not that self-knowledge is easy. Saints and sages have agreed that it is the hardest thing of all. To deceive and hide from oneself, to give in to distractions, to be misled by language that is meant to focus attention but in fact disperses it—that is easy. Mystics, who specialize in introspective honesty, are often reluctant to say anything about their spirituality, perhaps because words often bring with them a surplus of meaning that does more to scramble communication than promote it. *Love* itself is such a word, though maybe no more so than *ultimate concern* or *utter dependence* or *universal willingness* or any of the other attempts to name the experiential mystery in which religions are rooted. But here the point that needs emphasis is that the only way to confirm or verify such a proposal would be to discover in one's own conscious awareness a shift of priorities or a reordering of values of the kind that not infrequently comes to the attention of people who fall in love. A change like that is a gift. It is what grace is.

It remains that there would seem to be no way of knowing whether religious traditions do have an experiential component in common except by letting actual adherents of those traditions learn from one another what they have come to know of their inner life, their spirituality, their motivations and feelings, their repentance and devotion. That sort of dialogue is

## Once in a while we should say what is

I was pawing through a shelf of books the other day When out fell a note from my late brother in his tiny Adamant wry inarguable crisp half-cursive-half-not Handwriting, and just for an instant I saw and heard Him at his desk, in his study, his mustache bristling, Black coffee half-cold, the burl of his body wrapped In the arms of the chair that held him for thirty years, A chair as big as a horse and twice as heavy. I *heard* Him, I tell you, I did, and I *saw* him, half-shadowed, Scribbling notes: his philatelic pursuits, notes for his Class next week, notes on a book he was going to do About Benedictine spirituality . . . then I was only me By the bookshelf again. But for a second I was in my Brother's study, watching him. It was late, everybody Was in bed, but not him, as usual he was up late with Coffee. He was wearing a sweater. The scritch of his Pen. His shoulders like boulders. The dim procession Of his books, organized by genre and author. He died Three years ago. But I *saw* him, absorbed, thoroughly Attentive, scrawling notes. There's way more possible Than we think possible; possible turns out to be a verb. I don't know how else to explain things like this. They Happen all the time to all of us and we hesitate to gape About them publicly because the words sound like pap, *Miracle* and *epiphany* and *vision*, you come off as nuts, A religious goober who talks to owls and addled saints. But you know and I know that this happens. I guess we Will always understandably be hesitant to chat about it, Which is fine, as no one enjoys being labeled a goober; But once in a while, like here, we should admit that it's Real, and it happens all the time, and it's scary and cool. That's all. Once in a while we should gently say what is.

Brian Doyle

## There is no way of knowing if different religions share experiential components except by letting adherents learn from one another.

rare. Without it, though, if the proposals offered here are at all correct, the wider ecumenism, as it has been called, lacks an indispensable component.

**S**chematically stated, the argument of this essay turns on three propositions:

(1) God aids men and women, individually and immediately, changing the direction and goal of their whole existence, irrespective of desert or achievement on their part.

(2) The transformation so initiated is analogous to interpersonal human love, but without any prior conditions or subsequent restrictions, so that it may be identified with the love of God given by God the Spirit.

(3) This divine indwelling, since it is neither dependent on nor restricted by expressions of meaning, can and does occur in persons who have not met with the meaning of God incarnate that constitutes Christian religion.



Theologically speaking, the first of these propositions is pretty solid. It amounts to a definition of grace. Mostly, God enlists finite instruments in getting things done, but God acts without them in beckoning individuals beyond themselves toward himself. The second proposition can be contested, but reputable authorities support it. The third, however, is open to objections. It seems to separate and privilege the mission of the Spirit over the mission of the Word, and consequently it denies the uniqueness of Jesus, counts all religions as equal, reduces Christianity to just another option, and makes evangelizing otiose.

These are by no means quibbles. The end of a short essay is not a good place to deal with them, but something ought to be said in reply.

In the first place, nothing in this essay contradicts the teaching that anyone who is saved is saved through Christ the Son of God. To repeat, it is he who sends the Spirit, whenever and to whomever the Spirit is sent. Nor, secondly, has the uniqueness of Christ's incarnation been denied in any way. God has spoken "in many and various ways," but only once by a Son.

At the same time, however, this argument does assert that speaking is not the only thing God does, and it certainly implies that *what* God spoke by speaking his eternal Word at a particular time and place is not so unique as to be totally at variance with the utterances of holy persons who have responded in love to God's other self-gift, without themselves being God incarnate. Moreover, this last point goes hand in hand with a certain way of understanding Christ's role in the "economy" of salvation.

It is a mistake to constrict that role to one isolated event, Christ's death, construed as a kind of decoy that fooled the devil or a kind of lightning rod that deflected the wrath of God. Better to take the cross, together with the rest of Christ's life and teaching, as a word, a communication of what loving God and neighbor consists in and calls for in a thoroughly messed-up world. The claim that other religious traditions have no clue that this is how God deals with death-dealing malice and wickedness is simply not believable.

Which is not, of course, to say there is no difference between the meaning that was communicated in Jesus Christ and what has been meant by others. There have always been false prophets. Not every spirit is of God (1 John 4:1). All religions are prone to internal corruption. Are there vast numbers of people who need to hear Christ's gospel, to "test the spirits" by it, to repent? Indeed there are. A lot of them are Christians. Conversely, are there people who have heard and lived by approximations and perhaps even equivalents of that gospel? The gist of this essay is that it may well be so.

Whether it is so, whether there is significant convergence as well as difference, can only be determined empirically, which is to say by dialogue among those whose love for God opens them to listening to neighbors they endeavor to love. And insofar as such conversation happens, it might be regarded as itself a manifestation of the ongoing mission of the Spirit. It is the sort of thing God would do. CC

## 2016 NEW CLERGY INTERFAITH CONFERENCES

### Sustaining and Enriching Clergy Leadership for Congregational Life

Week One: June 25–July 2, 2016

Week Six: July 30–August 6, 2016



Chautauqua's interfaith New Clergy Program is offering two week-long conferences this summer, and invites applications from interested clergy in Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist and Hindu faith communities. During these weeks, Chautauqua Institution will provide full accommodations for clergy and their spouses or partners. Participants will reside on the Institution grounds, share meals, and meet daily with the program's directors, faculty, and distinguished chaplains and lecturers participating in Chautauqua's Department of Religion program. Discussions will focus on issues and experiences relevant to theological growth, leadership, renewal, and issues specific to the dynamics of those new to ministry.

Conference participant grants are awarded to those clergy who have been in congregational ministry (or their faith's equivalent) between 2 and 5 years, and are made possible through the support of various benefactors. These grants cover residency, meals, gate pass, arts performances in the Amphitheater, and access to the full Chautauqua program. Participants are responsible for their own transportation arrangements and expenses.

This will not be a vacation week, and the program is designed for adult professional interest,

interaction and development, and will maintain a rigorous schedule. As such, Chautauqua's New Clergy Interfaith Program is not conducive to the inclusion of children; and spouses, while encouraged to come, will not be included in some aspects of program interaction.

The dates of this program are Week #1 (June 25–July 2) and Week #6 (July 30–August 6). Applicants are asked to identify their preferred week.

For further information and for an application, please go to <http://www.ciweb.org/religion-new-clergy>. All applicants are asked to submit application electronically to Nancy Roberts [nroberts@ciweb.org](mailto:nroberts@ciweb.org).

#### Application deadline: February 1, 2016

Dr. Robert M. Franklin, Jr.  
Director, Department of Religion  
Chautauqua Institution

Dr. Derek Austin  
Director, Clergy Development Programming



# The way open to other ways

*SINCE HIS 1985 book No Other Name? Paul Knitter has been exploring religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue. He is especially concerned with how religious communities of the world can cooperate on issues of social justice and the environment—the topic of One Earth, Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility (1995). He has taught at Xavier University in Cincinnati and at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and has long been active in CRISPAZ, an ecumenical peacemaking organization in El Salvador. His personal multifaith journey is recounted in Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian (2009).*

**In *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, you say you needed resources outside Christianity to make sense of Christianity. Could you mention an aspect of the faith that didn't make sense and say what Buddhist resources helped you?**

I think that the uneasiness I had with much of the Christian creed had to do with its pervasive (but not necessarily inherent) dualism between God and the world. In much Christian speaking and preaching, God is referred to as an almighty but benevolent being who is in charge of everything and intervenes here but not there. Granting that we can't avoid anthropomorphisms in speaking about the Ultimate, Christians seem to take their anthropomorphic images literally. In line with the Christian mystics—including Paul and John in the New Testament—I was searching for a nondualistic God.

Help for such a search can come from many sources, but I found a particularly useful one in Mahayana Buddhism, especially its teaching on the nondualistic coinherence of Emptiness (its pointer to the Ultimate) and Form (the relative, finite world). There can be no Emptiness without Form and no Form without Emptiness. Emptiness (or for me, God) is manifest and perceptible in Form.

Or in the words of Julian of Norwich, there is a “oneing” between God and the world. With such a nondualistic experience of God, God does not intervene. God comes forth and manifests. God doesn't step into our lives; we become aware that God is already there.

**You note in the book that many insights of Buddhism can also be found within parts of the Christian tradition—like loss of self, or the interpenetration of the divine and this world. Couldn't some or all of the concerns you name be addressed from within the Christian tradition, without venturing into Buddhism?**

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Certainly. I just referred to the mystical tradition, a resource that many Christians neglect or are unacquainted with. For me, and I think a growing number of Christians, Buddhism is an entry into, or a flashlight with which to explore, the mystical or nondualistic contents of Christianity.

But it's not just that Buddhism has provided the flashlight with which I have discovered what was already in the Christian basement. Buddhism has also added to that basement. It has deepened, clarified, and sometimes corrected the way Christians image and experience the reality we call God.

To use the issues you mentioned: the loss of self in Buddhism is even more radical than what Christians generally mean or feel in talking about kenosis, or self-emptying. I might even dare to suggest that Buddhism could have helped St. Paul

**“God doesn't step into our lives; we become aware that God is already there.”**

grasp what he was getting at when he wrote to the Galatians: “It is no longer I who am alive, but Christ who is alive in me.” Buddhism has helped me to feel and comprehend what that “no longer I” contains and makes possible.

And as to the interpenetration of the divine and human, Buddhism is pushing or inviting me to overcome the possibly lingering dualism in understanding and grasping what that interpenetration really means. Buddhism invites Christians to recognize a real reciprocity between Emptiness and Form that can be also experienced between the divine and the human. It is not just that it is God in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28), but also it is we in whom God lives and moves and has God's being.

It's an asymmetrical reciprocity, for sure—God is the living sun and we are its rays—but still it's a reciprocal interpenetration. God can't be God without some finite, relative *other*. I think this is a possible—for me, a needed—stretching of Christian understanding and practice.

**Is there a problem with taking an aspect of one faith and inserting it into another faith? Can this really be done?**



Not only can it be done, but it has been done throughout the history of religions and is being done today. As comparative theologians like John Thatamanil and Michelle Voss Roberts point out to the postmodern critics of interreligious dialogue, religions are not isolated, impermeable, unchangeable realities. Religions have been affecting, challenging, learning from each other throughout time.

I give you Christianity, the amalgam of the early Jewish Jesus followers and the Greek-Roman members of Paul's communities; or Zen Buddhism, the offspring of the merging of Indian Buddhism and Chinese Taoism.

When interreligious dialogue really works, it leads to an "inserting" into—or more appropriately, a transformation of—one religion by another. The whole point of dialogue is not just to learn about and tolerate each other—although we certainly need more of that—but to learn from and ultimately collaborate with each other.

**Eboo Patel and others have argued that interreligious understanding needs to begin with cooperation on practical matters of justice and peace, not with large theological questions. How do you see it?**

I fully agree. In fact, let me be the typical academic and mention that Eboo Patel once told me that his reading of my *One Earth, Many Religions* was a guide for him in establishing the Interfaith Youth Core. One of the most effective, even urgent ways of entering interfaith conversation is to address and collaborate on the pressing ethical issues that confront and demand a response from all religious communities: the environmental crisis, poverty, horrendous economic inequality, and especially violence inspired by religion.

However, I have urged Eboo to move from cooperation to conversation. Acting together for the well-being of others and

of the planet will naturally lead to solidarity and friendship, but such friendship will also naturally and necessarily lead to talking together, to sharing with each other what in our respective traditions grounds and guides our acting together. Friends want to share what they hold true and sacred. And it's only friends who can handle the differences, sometimes the contradictions, between the teachings of, for instance, Jesus and Buddha and Muhammad.

**The claim that "Jesus is the only way" strikes some people as exclusivist and imperialistic. Do you agree?**

I certainly do. There is a debilitating tension, if not contradiction, in our Christian calls for dialogue (for instance, the revolutionary call for dialogue by the Second Vatican Council in *Nostra Aetate*) and our insistence that God has given us the only savior for all humankind and the full and final truth that is meant to include all other truths. If I may use an inappropriate comparison: it is like calling people to a card game, but also insisting that we have already been dealt all the aces.

To insist on the supremacy of Jesus leads (whether we intend it or not) to claims for the supremacy of Christianity. Just as we cannot build a multiracial society if we believe in white supremacy, we cannot build a multireligious society if we believe in Christian supremacy.

That's why I have devoted much of my career as a theologian to exploring the resources (often neglected) in our scriptures and our tradition that allow us—indeed, require us—to understand Jesus as truly savior of the world but not necessarily as the *only* savior of the world. With such an understanding of Jesus, Christians can be just as committed to Jesus as we are open to recognizing and learning from what God may be up to in other religions. As John B. Cobb Jr. has beautifully put it: "Jesus is the way that is open to other ways."



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One way to understand that claim might be not as the insistence on a certain formula about Jesus but as the insistence that Jesus' life of humility, inclusive compassion, and suffering love is the only way to God. Does that advance the discussion? Or is that exclusivist too?

Yes, I think it does advance the discussion. It is one of the ways in which we can reconstruct traditional Christology in a more pluralistic, dialogical way. It's a way of handling John 14:6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." This interpretation understands Jesus not just as an individual human being but as the incarnation of the way of living that will enable us to find and live the life of God. Without compassion for others, without the readiness to give of ourselves for the well-being of others, we are not going to be able to be in harmony with the Ultimate Reality that Jesus called "Abba" or Father-Dad.

This understanding of Jesus sees his salvific role as one of revealing the truth about God and how we are to live God's life rather than as one of fixing a broken relationship with God. If we understand Jesus' role as savior to be one of revealing the truth, we can be open to others who also enable us to deepen our understanding of God's truth. But if we think that Jesus saves us by fixing or bridging the gap between God and us, once the problem is fixed, we need no other fixers. So clarifying or correcting our understanding of *how* Jesus saves is an important piece in our efforts to construct a Christology that is open to dialogue with other religions.

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## Road trip

"This illusion trips him. . . . He runs.  
Ah: runs. Runs."

John Updike, *Rabbit, Run*

This step-after-step chase-to-the-afterlife  
invites detours—dust: the afterthought kicked up  
by heels leaving the scene: I run,  
you run, he runs, she runs, they run  
away, beyond, the body dragging  
the last of its soul by a shoelace.

Over deserts, over cliffs,  
over lakes—frozen and un—  
over hotel Gideons and attic King James,  
over *Good News for Modern Man*  
and *Book of Common Prayer*,  
the feet punctuate their ellipses, pivot  
to prodigal or penitent;  
you can't tell by the flesh  
blistered with persistence.  
It's the finish line that knows,  
the aching tendons that remember.

Marjorie Maddox

There are fruitful points of convergence between religions, but also points of fundamental divergence. How important is it, for example, that Christians view the created world as good in a way that Buddhists don't, and posit a self that is more substantial? How important are these divergences and what difference do they ultimately make in interreligious conversation?

There are real differences between Buddhism and Christianity, and these differences must make a difference in the dialogue. But I would want to qualify the suggestion that Buddhists don't "view the created world as good." This is an issue that Roger Haight and I explore in our soon-to-appear book *Jesus and Buddha: Friends in Conversation* (Orbis).

It's true that in their emphasis on personal transformation, Buddhists often have not taken the material world and history as seriously as have Jews, Christians, and Muslims. But at least in the Tibetan form of Buddhism that I practice, the world, although it is transient and therefore not to be clung to, is the manifestation of Emptiness. We are to embrace it, but not get stuck in it. Nirvana, Buddhists remind us, is to be found and lived nowhere else but right here in the middle of Samsara—this messy world.

So in the dialogue, Christians need to remind Buddhists that they have to take the world and historical-social structures more seriously than they perhaps have done in much of their tradition. It is not enough only to call for personal transformation; we also have to transform social structures. This Christian-Jewish challenge has been one of the factors in the recent development of what is called Socially Engaged Buddhism.

But at the same time, Buddhists remind Christians that a personal, nondualistic transformation by which we overcome our clinging to ourselves and our programs is a prerequisite for being able to transform society. This is the point that Thich Nhat Hanh makes in reminding Christians that they must first *be peace* if they are going to be able to *make peace*.

Taking differences seriously is crucial in any religious dialogue, but I have found that our differences and disagreements, if we engage them with humility and charity, almost always turn out to be complementary rather than contradictory.

**The forging of a personal faith by engagement with other faiths seems like an inherently individualistic task, marked by the threads of biography and circumstance. Does one lose in such a venture the very community in which faiths—and narratives of faith—take shape? Can religious faith survive without being embedded in such communities?**

As I engage my Buddhist friends who know that I am a Christian, I feel the responsibility to represent my tradition—in other words, to present not just what I think, but what I believe accurately represents or continues the message of Jesus of Nazareth as that message has been passed on, in abundant diversity, through the centuries. Admittedly, there is no one way of being a Christian or understanding the gospel. But to say that there are many does not mean that *any* representation of the gospel is acceptable. Fidelity to the community is essential in the dialogue.

At the same time, I feel the need to bring back to the community what I and others think they are learning in the dia-



logue with Buddhists. That obligation to bring back has, I think, a twofold grounding. I want to share the benefits of what I have learned from Buddhists in the conviction or expectation that it can help many of my fellow Christians, as it has helped me, to come to a reaffirmation of Christian beliefs and practices. But I also need to report back to the community in order to make sure that what I have learned from the dialogue can be received and affirmed by my fellow Christians. Certainly, not everyone will find it meaningful and acceptable. But if I don't hear an "Amen" from at least a significant number of the people I break bread with every Sunday, I would have to question whether I belong in that community.

What I have discovered in my engagement with Buddhism—and I am not alone in this discovery—is that I can and must belong to two different communities. I am spiritually nurtured and sustained by both the Buddhist (specifically the Tibetan) and the Christian (specifically the Roman Catholic) communities. I need to belong to both of them; I need to practice both—the Eucharist every Sunday and my daily Tibetan meditation. This is a spreading phenomenon in the United States and Europe that theologians are calling double or mutual belonging. I suspect that in the coming decades, the ranks of Christian double-belongers are going to increase.

**It seems like someone with the kind of dual practice you describe would face a particular challenge in passing it on to a second generation. One can imagine parents bringing kids to two kinds of services, say, but that would itself not constitute the kind of community of support that religions typically foster. Do you think in the end one needs a primary community?**

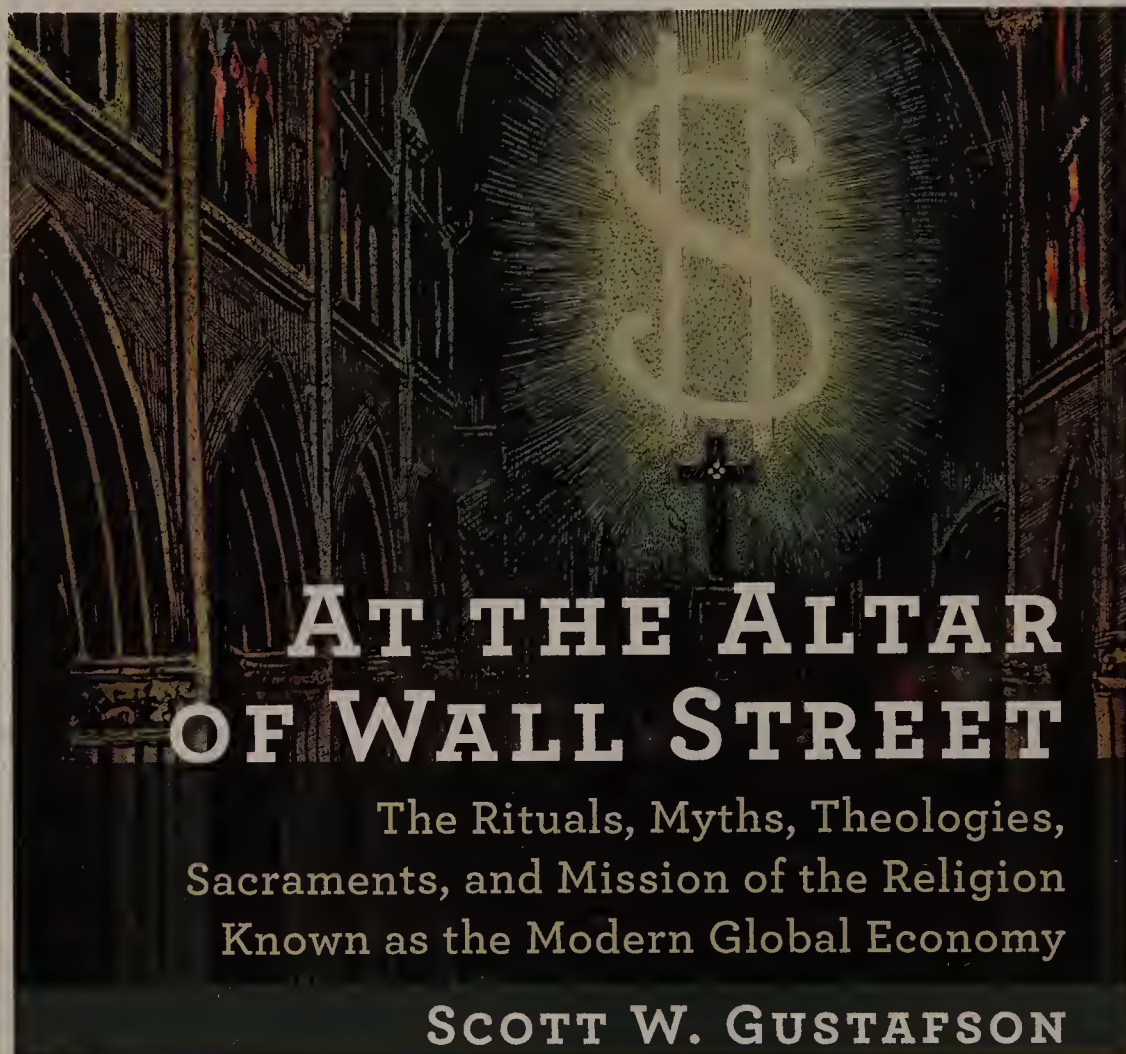
In my marriage, when I realized that I was a Buddhist-Christian double-belonger, and when my wife moved from a Christian to a Buddhist spiritual practice around the same time, our two children were already young adults and out of the house. In a sense, I wish that our shifts in religious practices would have happened earlier so that we would have had to face the challenge of bringing up children in a family in which the parents had two very different spiritual practices and communities. I think this is becoming more and more the situation for many children.

Though I am no expert in child psychology, I suspect that in a child's early

years, belonging to two different religious communities can be a bit confusing. Kids need the clarity and security of one community or church, where they can witness adults living and practicing the message either of Jesus or of Buddha. As the kids become older—perhaps already in late grammar or early high school—double-practicing parents can introduce them, for example, to meditation practices at home or visit mom's sangha instead of dad's parish. What develops out of such openness and exposure is, of course, for the children to see and determine.

CC

—David Heim



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# Learning to give thanks

by Martin B. Copenhaver

**NO ONE IS** born thankful. Thankfulness doesn't come naturally to us, and sometimes it doesn't come at all. Rather, thankfulness is a quality that must be fostered and nurtured. But how? How do we teach our children to be thankful, and how do we lead ourselves in the ways of thankfulness? That question, though seemingly simple, is not easily answered.

We are enjoined in a variety of ways to count our blessings. Survey all that you have. Take stock of all you've been given. There is value in that, to be sure, but such an exercise does not in itself prompt thankfulness, because thankfulness has no direct correlation to abundance. If there were such a correlation, if we were given some abundance, we would be somewhat thankful, and if we were given more abundance, we would be more thankful. But it doesn't work that way, does it?

**The more we have, the more likely we are to say, "Thanks for nothing."**

In fact, every Thanksgiving holiday we confront an irony: the more we have, the less likely we are to thank God. Continuous bounty doesn't always create thankfulness; sometimes it actually seems to stamp out thankfulness.

We live in a time of extraordinary abundance, but that hasn't led us to greater thankfulness. In fact, another defining characteristic of our age is that we live with an extraordinary sense of entitlement. We have much, and for the most part we have concluded that we deserve all that we have and probably more.

Let me put it another way: Who is tempted to claim that he is a self-made man or she is a self-made woman? Is it the person who has few of the world's goods and has known little of earthly success? Or the person who has been given much, owns much?

I once heard of a man who consistently boasted that he was a self-made man until an exasperated friend finally declared, "Well, sir, that relieves the Lord of a terrific responsibility."

Such an attitude also deprives the Lord of thanks. True thanksgiving begins with humility, the humility to recognize that we did not create ourselves, that everything we are and everything we have is a gift.

On *The Simpsons*, when Bart is asked to offer thanks at a family meal, he says, "Dear God, we bought all of this stuff with our own money, so thanks for nothing."

Bart Simpson's prayer summarizes the reigning sentiments of our age. Often the more we have, the more likely we are to say, "Thanks for nothing." After all, the implications of thanksgiving are greater when we have much. The stakes are that much higher. There is more to protect. Those of us who have much and desire more feel the need to isolate ourselves from the realization that ultimately we really own nothing, that everything is from God and is God's. So those of us who have substantial abundance fence in our accumulated goods and tell ourselves that everything we have is earned or deserved.

No, abundance doesn't necessarily lead to thankfulness. The very magnitude of what we have can numb us. I learned when my oldest child, Alanna, was very young that a visit to a toy store can be overwhelming for a young child. Not understanding money, she assumed that she could have anything she wanted. So she bounced about like a ball in a pinball machine, wanting this and that so frantically that she didn't pause long enough to want anything very much at all. There were so many toys in the store that she couldn't begin to appreciate any one toy.

We adults can be similarly numbed when we're bombarded by bounty. Give a person one square meal a day, and he or she will find time and reason to give thanks. But give a person an opulent feast every night, and it won't be long before he or she begins to quibble over whether the meal really deserves that three-star rating. Isn't this the way with us? We can have so many blessings that we fail to note any of them.

The apostle Paul's urging to "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess. 5:18) is a reminder not just to those who are experiencing hardship, where blessings are few. Those same words are also a reminder to us who live amid bounty, where the blessings are easily taken for granted. We need the reminder no less than others, and in many ways we need it more. "Give thanks in all circumstances" when we seem to have so little and, yes, when we have so much.

Here I think Paul gives us the beginning of a response to our original question: How is thankfulness engendered? By

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*Martin B. Copenhaver is president of Andover Newton Theological Seminary. This article is excerpted from his book Room to Grow: Meditations on Trying to Live as a Christian, published this month by Eerdmans.*



“giving thanks in all circumstances,” by continually offering thanks. The psalmist even commands the people to give thanks: “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. O give thanks to the God of gods, for his steadfast love endures forever” (Ps. 136:1–2). Notice that the psalmist doesn’t tell us to be thankful, but to offer thanks. Offer thanks. Bless God’s name. You may not feel like doing it but do it anyway.

## There is something about offering thanks that makes us whole.

Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” We might be familiar with this pronouncement, but if we don’t read it with care, we might reverse the statement through a kind of scriptural dyslexia. We might read it to say, “Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also.” That would make sense to us, because much of the time our dollars follow our heart’s lead. We give to what matters to us.

But that isn’t what Jesus said.

That’s the appeal we hear from, say, public radio or our alma mater: if you care about this institution, you will write a check. In other words, “Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also.” But Jesus didn’t say that.

Jesus is speaking of a different dynamic. Give and spend where you want your heart to be, and then let your heart catch up. Don’t just give to those things you care about. Give to the things you *want* to care about. Ask yourself, “If I were the sort of person I long to be, then what would I do? How would I spend my money?” Then do what you would do if you were that sort of person. Put your treasure where you want your heart to be. If you do, says Jesus, your heart will go there. If you want to care more about the kind of car you drive, buy an expensive one. If you want to care more about property values, remodel your house. But if you want to grow in your faith, bring an offering to God.

Wherever your treasure is, your heart is sure to follow. Here as elsewhere in the scriptural tradition, we are not told to feel a certain way, but enjoined to act in a certain manner. After all, feelings, unlike actions, cannot be governed by simple will. For instance, Jesus doesn’t ask us to feel charitable toward our neighbors and our enemies. That would

be asking something that’s not in our control. We can’t feel on command. Instead, Jesus asks us to act.

Turn your cheek. Give to those who beg from you. Pray for your enemies. Give thanks to God. Don’t wait until you feel like it. Nike could have borrowed its motto from Jesus: “Just do it.”

Here we come upon another irony: it’s by continually expressing thanks that we can come to be thankful. Day in and day out, in and out of season, we are to offer thanks, perhaps at first just to get the feel of it and then because we feel it. So sometimes, especially at first, we don’t come to worship to offer our thanks to God because we are thankful.

Rather, we come to worship to offer our thanks to God so that we might some day be thankful. Sometimes words of thanks need to be on our lips before, by some slow and largely imperceptible process, they can take up residence in our hearts.

I think we have some understanding of this. We say to our children, “Say ‘thank you’ to the gentleman,” or “What do you say to the nice lady?”

We continually prompt, coax, urge, and demand that thanks be offered. Do we put our children and ourselves through all of that just so they will behave in a polite manner? Perhaps. But we do this also because we have some understanding that continually offering thanks, day in and day out, in and out of season, whether we feel like it or not, helps engender a spirit of thankfulness.



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It may begin slowly, because we're so accustomed to receiving God's gifts with callused hands. We begin by saying thanks, not just one day a year, but by practicing thanksgiving every day and seeking opportunities to do so in every circumstance.

In an intriguing book called *365 Thank Yous*, John Kralik writes about writing a thank-you note a day for an entire year. He didn't resolve to write all of those thank-you notes at a time when he was feeling particularly grateful. In fact, it was at a particularly low time in his life. His small law firm was losing money and losing its lease. He was going through a difficult divorce. He lived in a small, stuffy apartment where he often slept on the floor under an ancient air conditioner. He was middle-aged, overweight, and at the end of his rope.

Then, one day, he got lost on a mountain hike and didn't know how to get home. By the time he found his way down the mountain he had a plan. He would write a thank-you note each day for a year. He writes, "My only problem: Did I have anything to be grateful for? The way my life was going, I hardly thought so."

But he got started, by writing notes to the people close to him, his family and friends. Then it got harder. "One day," he writes, "I just couldn't think of anybody to thank." He stopped at his regular Starbucks, where the barista greeted him by name—"John, your usual venti?"—and with a big smile. Kralik reflected, "I thought, this is really kind of a great gift in this day and age of

impersonal relationships, that someone had cared enough to learn my name and what I drank in the morning." So he wrote the barista a thank-you note. And so it went through the year. Each day a thank-you note, each day a day of thanksgiving.

Kralik says the experience of expressing thanks day in and day out changed the way he approached life. It even got him to church:

I had considered myself something of an atheist for years, but I started going to this church [near the end of that year]. The music was plentiful, delivered with . . . genuine enthusiasm. The dominant message was that grace was still available. To everyone. Even to me. I can deal with that, I thought. Through the process of writing thank-you notes, I had developed a notion of being blessed with grace.

There is something about offering thanks that makes us whole. There is something about offering thanks that can make us feel, with Kralik, that we are "blessed with grace." In fact, the word that is translated as *thanks* in the New Testament is the same word that's sometimes translated as *grace*. The Greek *charis*, or "grace," may define an act of giving or an act of receiving: if giving, the word means "gift or unearned favor"; if receiving, then the word is best translated as "gratitude." We see a reflection of this double meaning in the prayers that are offered before a meal.

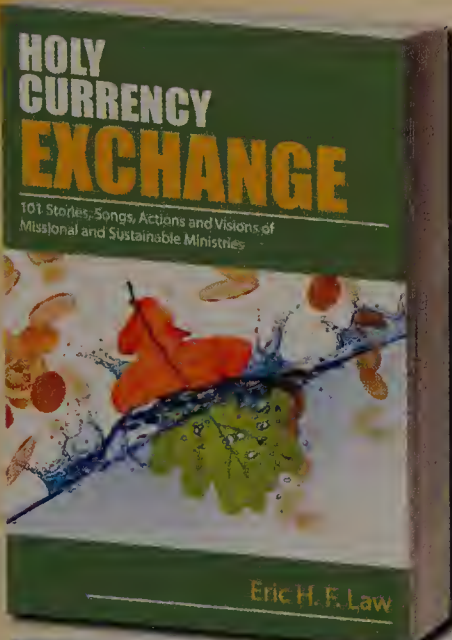
Some families "say grace" while others "give thanks." It's the same word (*charis*) in both instances. I like to think of it as the endless echo of grace. We receive a gift in the same spirit in which it is given—it's all grace. We can even lose track of where it begins and where it ends, for it all seems to be of one piece.

People whose lives are not marked with gratitude—whose lives are governed by a sense of entitlement or grievance—are miserable. No matter how much they have in material wealth, health, or success, their lives are fractured or incomplete if what they have is not accompanied by a sense of gratitude. They are not made whole.

By contrast, those whose lives are marked with gratitude, infused with thankfulness, join in the echo of grace and receive a particular blessing reserved for them. They are made well. They are made whole.



C. S. Lewis observed that grateful people are emotionally healthy people. "Praise," he said, "almost seems to be inner health made audible." I believe Lewis would accept this friendly amendment to his observation: words of thanksgiving are something like inner health made audible.


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# Faith MATTERS

by Samuel Wells

## Rejects in the center

**WE ALL DO IT.** At the supermarket we survey the peaches or bananas and choose the ones with no bruises, leaving the rest. Similarly, a craftsperson will examine several pieces of wood before deciding on the one to work with and setting aside the rest.

What's it like to be those that are rejected? What's it like to be the apple that's tossed away, the piece of wood that's useless, the stone that the builders set aside? Rejection keys into our profound feelings of unworthiness, of being useless, peripheral, no more than a passenger in a world full of drivers. It makes us feel stupid, ugly, and unlovable.

I worked in a community where a leader said to me, "You know, we're a bunch of misfits who somehow fit together." He'd discovered that if we worked constructively with this reality, we could become something beautiful. Inclusion isn't really the right word. It suggests there are those "in the center" whose lives are normal and privileged that should jolly well open the doors, welcome people in "from the periphery," and be kind and generous. The problem is that this approach is patronizing and paternalistic. The community leader wasn't regarding himself as normal and secure and above it all: he saw himself as one of the misfits. He was reframing the idea of a center and a periphery; the cost of that idea is that the periphery feels humiliated and the center feels smug.

The Church of England has church buildings all around the country that look like centers of power and authority. It has extended hospitality in a sometimes clumsy but mostly generous-hearted desire to welcome the misfit and the stranger. But it feels it's losing its grip on the country. Perhaps the critical mass of the sorted and normal no longer assumes that church is part of what it means to be sorted and normal—or perhaps the idea of a sorted and normal center was profoundly flawed all along.

While fewer people attend church services, more people are joining support groups for parents of Down syndrome children or relatives of those killed in road traffic accidents. These gatherings sometimes feel more engaged, alive, and focused than a lot of church services. What I saw at an evening meeting on dementia and faith felt like the renewal of the church. It felt as if the church was finding a new cornerstone—a cornerstone made up of stones that the builders had rejected.

The film *Pride* tells the true story of a group of lesbian and gay activists in 1984 London who realize that the way society, media, and government despise them is the way the same

forces think about miners, who are in the midst of their titanic struggle with the Thatcher government. The activists decide to reach out to residents of a depressed mining village in South Wales. With patience, forgiveness, grace, courage, and resilience, prejudices on both sides are broken down and an amazing alliance grows. The two groups of stones that the builders have rejected decide to set aside bitterness and self-pity; eventually they realize they've become one another's cornerstone. A bunch of misfits somehow fit together. It's an icon of what church can be, what church should be.

The church is down in the dumps because it thinks it needs to be full of big and strong and powerful people. But Jesus was the stone the builders rejected, and in his ministry he surrounded himself with stones that the builders had rejected. Jesus didn't found the church on the so-called center—the sorted, the normal, the benevolent, and the condescending. Jesus assumed the church would always need the work of the Holy Spirit—the work or miracle of subversion, of turning the world upside down. Nothing's changed except for a lot of intervening years when the church has forgotten who Jesus was and whose company he kept.

We're not talking about a bland and affirming insight that a lot of people who've been overlooked in life turn out to have important things to contribute. It's much more radical. The stone that the builders rejected didn't find a place in the wall by being thoughtfully included like a last-minute addition to a family photo. The rejected stone became the cornerstone, the keystone—the stone that held up all the others, the crucial link, the vital connection.

That's what ministry's all about—not condescendingly making alienated strangers welcome, but seeking out the rejected because they are the energy and the life force that will transform us all. Every pastor, every missionary, every evangelist, and every disciple should have these words over their desks, on their windshields and screensavers, or in the photo section of their wallets—the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

If you're looking for the future church, look at what church and society have so blithely rejected. The life of the church is about constantly recognizing the sin of how much we have rejected, and celebrating that God gives us back what we once rejected to become the cornerstone of our lives.

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*Samuel Wells is the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London.*



# IN Review

## Room to grow up

by LaVonne Neff

Are today's young adults more immature than their age mates in previous generations? Yes, says Julie Lythcott-Haims, who was Stanford University's dean of freshmen and undergraduate advising for more than ten years. But it's not their fault.

During her time at Stanford, Lythcott-Haims saw increasing numbers of what she calls "existentially impotent" university students. They may have been high school valedictorians, but they needed parental help to write their college application essays and term papers, to choose their majors, to get them out of bed in the morning, to give them directions when they got lost in strange towns, to intercede when they faced problems with professors, to find and furnish their apartments, and, in one case, to figure out how to get a large package from the sidewalk to a dorm room (Mom eventually called the resident fellow on her son's behalf).

As a mother raising two children in high-pressure Palo Alto, California, Lythcott-Haims is well acquainted with the way these helpless kids were raised. *Helicopter parent* is the popular derogatory term for "a parent who hovers over a child in a way that runs counter to the parent's responsibility to raise a child to independence." Yet in many upper-middle-class communities, not hovering is equated with dereliction of duty.

Well-educated, affluent parents set extremely high standards for themselves and, by extension, for their children. If parenting is not their full-time job, it is at least their ever-present preoccupation. No aspect of their children's lives escapes their attention. As one Silicon Valley mother explains, "When you're a

woman in this area that isn't a CEO of a company, you feel you have to do all this stuff to prove you are capable—of something."

Unfortunately, this intense approach to raising children produces exhausted parents, incompetent children, and high rates of depression all around. It does not produce adults equipped to deal with the challenges they will face after graduation.

The problem, Lythcott-Haims believes, is that helicopter parents do not allow their children space to develop the skills they will need in order to succeed in the adult world. Kids who are never allowed unstructured playtime have little opportunity to dream and create. Kids whose parents intervene whenever they encounter real or imagined slights are afraid to stand up for themselves. Kids who are protected from every conceivable danger avoid taking risks. Kids who are not allowed to fail develop few resources for dealing with setbacks. Forced to follow a rigorous, check-listed college-preparatory lifestyle from cradle through high school, they don't learn how to make decisions and work independently. With continued propping up from their parents and professors, they may do well in college. But when they hit the hard, cruel realities of the working world, many millennials are at sea.

After providing copious examples of the serious harm today's intense parenting style is doing to the rising generation, Lythcott-Haims switches from description to prescription. The goal of parents, she says, should be to help their children develop "self-efficacy"—that is, the adult

### How to Raise an Adult: Break Free of the Overparenting Trap and Prepare Your Kid for Success

By Julie Lythcott-Haims  
Henry Holt, 368 pp., \$27.00

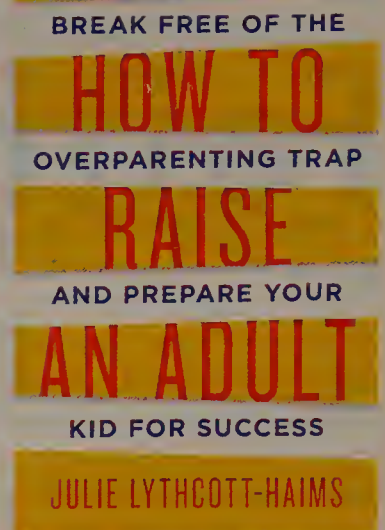
ability "to complete a task, reach goals, and manage a situation."

"Kids don't acquire life skills by magic at the stroke of midnight on their eighteenth birthday," she writes. "Childhood is meant to be the training ground. Parents can assist—not by always being there to do it or to tell them how to do it via cell phone—but by getting out of the way and letting kids figure things out for themselves." In case parents can't figure out how to do this, she offers multiple chapters full of real-life anecdotes and parenting strategies.

Don't scoff. These aren't the usual self-help tips endlessly recycled in parenting best sellers. Think of them as encouragement for people who, finding themselves surrounded by frantically whirring helicopter parents, need affirmation and guidance as they look for a better way.

It's OK if your kid is sometimes bored, Lythcott-Haims says in her chapter on play. It's good modeling when you and a friend relax on lawn chairs "chatting, laughing, and enjoying yourselves over the beverage of your choice." It's

*LaVonne Neff blogs at [livelydust.blogspot.com](http://livelydust.blogspot.com) and has not given this book to her children because they are already raising her five grandchildren perfectly.*





vital that kids help around the house, that they learn to think critically and even to disagree with you, that they experience “mistakes and curveballs.” And it’s absolutely fine if they end up going to a college that is not one of the top ten ranked by *U.S. News and World Report*.

Lythcott-Haims hates the *U.S. News* annual college issue. College presidents, she says, call it the “beauty pageant.” Its apparently objective data is sometimes manipulated by the schools or by the magazine, she claims, and anyway, nearly a quarter of its ranking basis is totally subjective. Yet parents study it intently, and they “mistakenly regard the rankings as the true indicators of the relative value of each college’s education.” The result is predictable: top-ranked colleges get more selective each year (Stanford and Harvard, Lythcott-Haims’s alma maters, now accept fewer than 6 percent of applicants), driven parents arrange their children’s entire childhoods around

activities aimed at tipping the admissions scales in their favor, and an alarming number of kids miss out on childhood and do not develop the skills needed for successful adulthood.

It’s all so unnecessary, says this former college adviser. Hundreds of colleges and universities offer an excellent education. For a different approach to ranking colleges, she suggests checking out alumni-factor.com, whose criteria are not selectivity and test scores but “how alumni . . . fare out in the world, and how they feel about themselves and their lives.”

“If we focus on encouraging our kids to look for schools where they can feel a sense of fit and belonging,” she writes, “and if we pull back those blinders that have us and our kids focusing on only the most highly selective schools and be proud of where our kids apply and get admitted, . . . things will turn out just fine.”

That is the message of *How to Raise an Adult*: everything’s going to be OK.

So relax. Pay attention to your own passions, health, relationships, and joys, and give your kids time and space to pay attention to theirs.

“Yes, this author of a book on parenting is saying you might want to stop reading so many books on parenting and give yourself a bit more credit,” Lythcott-Haims writes. “Slow down, take a deep breath, look within, hug your partner, and hug your kid: Parenting doesn’t have to feel so hard anymore. You’ve got this.”

Unfortunately, the people who would benefit most from this book—those helicopter parents who are trying so hard to protect their children from all harm that they end up creating seriously stunted young adults—will likely stop reading it after the first chapter or two, especially if they received it as a gift from critical grandparents. And that’s too bad, because the world may not need more Ivy League graduates. It does, however, need all the functional adults it can get.

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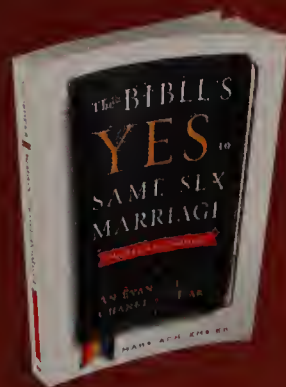
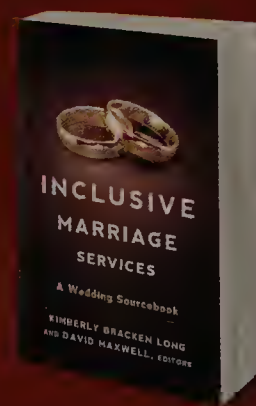
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## Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today

By David Nirenberg

University of Chicago Press, 352 pp., \$45.00

David Nirenberg is a very learned historian who tackles topics of a scope that would be too daunting for most other writers. In *Neighboring Faiths*, he addresses themes that are critically significant for contemporary debates, and by no means only within the realm of religion.

Nirenberg's approach runs directly contrary to familiar modern assumptions about the nature and definition of "Great Religions" and about how people belong to them. Particularly in the West, we know that an individual adheres to one faith at any given time, although conversion is certainly possible. The frontiers between those faiths are clear

and well patrolled, and dialogue between them is a cautious and tentative enterprise. It is difficult then to imagine non-Western societies—or indeed, earlier Western communities—where such boundaries were much more fluid. But they were. For instance, recent scholarship has stressed how very slow and gradual was the break between Judaism and Christianity in Late Antiquity; in some regions the process stretched over several centuries.

For much of Western history, Christians lived in societies where they were the overwhelming if not exclusive majority, and other faiths were encountered rarely. Jews and Muslims were imaginary beasts whose views demanded little consideration or respect. Yet historically, such exclusivity was not always the rule, and particularly in the Mediterranean world the three faiths often coexisted for centuries.

The best-known example was undoubtedly in medieval Islamic Spain. Modern writers love to tell how believers

of all shades flourished alongside each other in cultural and intellectual harmony. This was the legendary and somewhat mythical era of *convivencia*, which is so often cited as a night-and-day contrast with the intolerant Christianity of most European nations. I describe this view as mythical because the authentic spells of harmony were so regularly interrupted by pogroms and persecutions as to cast doubt on the benevolent image of medieval Islamic societies. The Granada pogrom against Jews in 1066 was as savage as anything Christian Europe would produce during the medieval era. The Iberian Camelot of the modern imagination is, to say the least, highly idealized.

Nirenberg is obviously far removed from any such myth making, or even from simple debunking. Rather, he uses Iberia as a setting to explore how the three faiths interacted so intimately, mainly during the era of growing Christian hegemony after 1250 or so. His central theme is how these neighbors "loved, tolerated, massacred, and expelled one another—all in the name of God." Jews, Muslims, and Christians were indeed all children of Abraham, and that extended family was often spectacularly dysfunctional, but it was a family.

Although well thought out, Nirenberg's book is avowedly a collection of case studies and essays rather than a thoroughly integrated whole. This means that he offers in-depth treatments of specific incidents, such as the hideous Valencia massacres of 1391, when Christians slaughtered the city's Jews, and the events he discusses in the chapter titled "Deviant Politics and Jewish Love: Alfonso VIII and the Jewess of Toledo."

Nirenberg offers splendid and seemingly paradoxical accounts of such religious interactions. He shows repeatedly how scholars constructed their religious foes in the grimmest possible terms, and Iberia produced many such fierce polemics. Such tracts coexisted with extensive social and family contacts that

*Reviewed by Philip Jenkins, professor of history at Baylor University and the author of The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade.*



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were friendly and often intimate. We see Jews, Muslims, and Christians “interacting not only as abstractions or categories in each other’s theologies and ideologies, but also as neighbors forced to jostle together on narrow streets, figures of thought elbowing figures of flesh, and in the process transforming both.”

There would have been no need for legislatures and councils to continue forbidding intermarriage and interfaith sex unless ordinary laypeople were enthusiastically engaged in these practices. And at least some of those who were not marrying outside their religion were boldly going into the brothels assigned to those other faith communities. Spain inevitably, and uncomfortably, became a land of mixed blood, a fact that tormented later generations.

Also, political exigencies meant that power struggles often crossed religious lines. Spain’s legendary Christian warrior was El Cid, whose Arabic-derived name was bestowed by his allies and vassals. Christian writers often criticized Catholic rulers for their excessive kindness to Jews and Jewish communities, a tolerance that was overruled by infuriated Christian mobs. In the 17th century, Miguel Cervantes drily credited his *Don Quixote*, Spain’s greatest literary classic, to a fictitious Moorish author named Cide Hamete Benengeli.

Plenty of scholars have discussed interfaith relations in this region and have examined how thinkers of each religion portrayed their counterparts. What makes Nirenberg’s book distinctive is his emphasis on how such conversations reshaped the self-image of the religion undertaking the portrayal—how, for example, when Christians studied Islam, their observations redefined Christian identity.

Such redefinitions could lean in the direction of tolerance. Though a medieval Christian might think that a particular idea or practice is characteristic of Muslims and therefore should be avoided at all costs, the idea or practice often leads to the opposite response—members of one group almost unconsciously adopt the practices of their neighbors because they are part of the general cultural ambience and part of what it means to live in that society.

In Iberia, that kind of assimilation in turn inspired new and more intolerant religious movements, which sometimes originated outside of Iberia. Time and again, just as Muslims and Christians were learning to coexist, Christian Crusaders and Islamic jihadis arrived to rebuild the walls between the faiths.

Meanwhile, internal reformers zealously sought to draw firm and proper boundaries. As the Spanish-born St. Vincent Ferrer noted in the early 15th century, “The neighbor of a Jew will never be a good Christian.” Spiritual contamination could be avoided by ensuring that non-Christian neighbors converted to the true faith, willingly or otherwise, and Vincent toiled strenuously to win over Jews. He was at his most active in the generation or so after the massacres of 1391, an age of mass conversions when concepts of social and racial identity were in a process of rapid transformation. Vincent became the patron saint of builders precisely because attitudes and acts like his constructed a religiously and racially pure Spain.

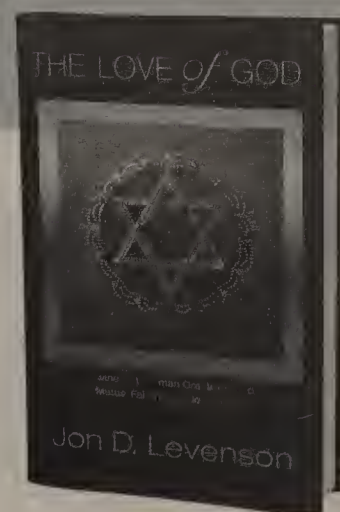
Over time, still more radical solutions suggested themselves. Gradually expulsions of religious minorities escalated from local and regional affairs to the thorough national cleansing that reached its culmination in the 17th century. By that point, Spanish governments were no longer content to remove Jews and Muslims (those groups had long gone), but struck at their converted descendants who had formally accepted Christianity, the *conversos* and *Moriscos*. Even remaining close to a tainted faith was now enough to attract vengeance.

One of Nirenberg’s major themes is the emergence, especially during the 15th century, of genealogical obsessions applied to Jewish identity that came uncomfortably close to a modern-sounding rhetoric of race. He devotes an important chapter to the vexed question of whether there was race before modernity and argues that in the Iberian context, the concept was scarcely avoidable.

It is tempting to extend Nirenberg’s analysis to other regions where Islam rather than Christianity won the decisive political victory. If we look at Egypt, another great land of three faiths, we see

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close parallels to the systematic hardening of attitudes that Spain experienced, and in the same years. In both lands massacres and forced conversions became much more frequent. It was not just that Christianity was becoming harsher and more intolerant in the late Middle Ages. Rather, larger transnational forces were at work, economic and social trends that were influenced by the change in climate.

By the early 16th century Spanish elites had thoroughly convinced themselves of the intimate alliance between race and faith, and those ideas profoundly influenced the lords and warriors who set off to conquer the New World. The ideas formed in encounters with Moors were now applied wholeheartedly to Aztecs and Incas. The conquistadors who invaded Mexico invoked James as their patron saint—Santiago Matamoros, the Moor-slayer.

The book's final chapter is "Islam and the West: Two Dialectical Fantasies," which pulls together themes of the construction of history and memory that

appear sporadically throughout the work. How should we regard interactions between communities of different faiths, whether in the past or in the present? One popular solution is to imagine the West and Islam as utterly different categories in perpetual struggle, a continuing clash of civilizations, although such a view represents an abandonment of critical historical sense. Scarcely less improbable, though, is the modern romanticization of the old Arabic Spain, the "fairy tale" of al-Andalus and *convivencia*. Nirenberg's comments on these debates are judicious and balanced.

*Neighboring Faiths* is an excellent book that thoroughly repays careful reading and reflection, but it is not primarily for the general reader. Nirenberg is a scholar writing primarily to scholars; the 210 pages in the chapters are followed by more than 70 pages of endnotes in small type. Nonacademics will find his work densely argued and sometimes heavy going. Any reader who perseveres, though, will be richly rewarded.

## The Two-State Delusion: Israel and Palestine— A Tale of Two Narratives

By Padraig O'Malley  
Viking, 512 pp., \$30.00

The obituary for the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been written multiple times over the past two decades. From the moment the Oslo Accords were signed, observers have warned that the geographical basis for a two-state solution is being eroded by the construction of Israeli settlements, road networks, walls, buffer zones, electrified fences, and more. Yet Palestinian, Israeli, and other political leaders continue to affirm that a two-state solution is the only game in town.

At times rhetorical commitment to the two-state solution has slipped, as it did in the days preceding the March 2015 Israeli parliamentary elections, when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in

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a bid to prevent voters from abandoning his center-right Likud party for parties still further to the right, pledged that his government would not permit the creation of a Palestinian state. Yet since his reelection Netanyahu has returned to the rhetoric of a two-state solution, even as his government strengthens the settlement enterprise that renders such a solution unworkable.

In *The Two-State Delusion*, Padraig O'Malley, professor of peace and reconciliation at the University of Massachusetts, has penned a deeply skeptical study about the possibility of a two-state solution. O'Malley has extensive experience in the study of peace-building processes in Northern Ireland and South Africa and has now turned his attention to another purportedly intractable conflict.

O'Malley is by no means the first scholar to suggest that the two-state approach represents a failed paradigm: scholars such as Tony Judt, Virginia Tilley, and Edward Said have advanced similar claims. Yet whereas most critics of the two-state approach suggest some other paradigm to replace it—a struggle for equal rights within one state for Israeli Jews and Palestinians; some form of binational confederation; a vision of parallel, overlapping states—O'Malley remains in the deconstructing stage.

O'Malley examines many different aspects of the conflict: the fate of Palestinian refugees; the radically asymmetrical economic arrangements between Israel and the occupied territories; inequitable access to water resources; the relentless construction of settlements; the status of Jerusalem; the so-called demographic problem facing Israel, in which Israeli Jews will soon become a minority within the land over which Israel exercises sovereign control; and more. His takeaway from this exhaustive examination is skepticism about the future of the two-state solution, and palpable dismay—*disgust* might not be too strong a word—at what he views as the captivity by Israelis and Palestinians in their own narratives and


in the hatred for the other that such narratives breed.

By the end of the book, what little hope O'Malley expresses is based on the prospect of Israelis and Palestinians coming to respect each other's narratives over time. This view seems odd given the many chapters outlining the material ways in which the Israeli settlement project has left Palestinians enclosed within ever more restricted islands of territory and has thus rendered a two-state solution unworkable. Even odder is how little space O'Malley devotes to thinking beyond the two-state solution. He pays scant attention to the Palestinians, including Palestinian Christians, and Israeli Jews who are working to forge new paradigms.

Antonio Gramsci famously wrote that pessimism of the intellect should be joined to optimism of the will. O'Malley has pessimism about the two-state solution down cold. Some optimism, however tenuous, regarding paradigms that might replace that solution is sorely missing.


P


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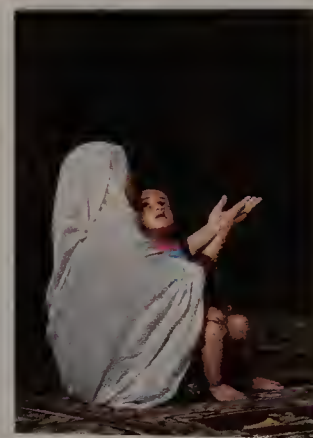
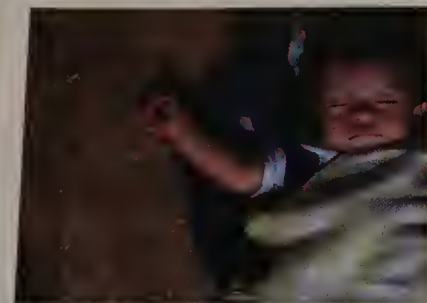
  
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*Reviewed by Alain Epp Weaver, author of Mapping Exile and Return: Palestinian Dispossession and a Political Theology for a Shared Future (Fortress).*

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## BookMarks

### Advent in Narnia: Reflections for the Season

By Heidi Haverkamp

Westminster John Knox Press, 96 pp., \$16.00

C. S. Lewis placed the Christian story in the fantasy world of Narnia so that readers could encounter the story in a fresh way. Haverkamp uses Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* so others might experience Advent in a fresh way. The book grew out of an Advent series Haverkamp presented at her Episcopal Church. The book includes 28 devotional readings, which draw largely on the first part of the *Chronicles of Narnia*, including scripture and reflection questions. Four group discussion guides are included as well as suggestions for creating a Narnia Night for children.

### Why This Jubilee? Advent Reflections on Songs of the Seasons

By James C. Howell

Upper Room Books, 112 pp., \$12.99 paperback

How easy it is for Christians to sing hymns without pondering the meaning of the texts. Howell encourages us to slow down and take notice. For each week of Advent, he provides meditations on the texts of Advent hymns and Christmas carols, including some secular songs, to prepare readers for the coming of Christmas and to ponder the meaning of the incarnation. Four sessions for group use are provided.

### Walking Backwards to Christmas

By Stephen Cottrell

Westminster John Knox Press, 128 pp.,  
\$14.00 paperback

Cottrell tells the Christmas story in reverse, starting with Anna and going back to the hopes of Isaiah and Moses. Each episode is imaginatively told. Cottrell notes that women have a key role to play in this drama, and he gives them preference (for example, beginning with Anna instead of Simeon).



## Promo for Mars

**F**uture accounts of a manned space mission to Mars may refer to *The Martian* as the beginning step toward funding and launching such a mission. Sure, George W. Bush may have championed space exploration (though the sticker shock in Recession America caused us all to blanch), and Sputnik may have scared Americans into supporting Kennedy's space program. But it took Matt Damon to launch us to Mars.

Much of what is fascinating about *The Martian* is not what happens in the film but the conversations that happen outside it. NASA was, to say the least, enthusiastic in its support. The Johnson Space Center depicted in the film is not the one you can visit in Houston; it's a futuristic one with all the computer gadgetry that the space agency hopes to have. In perfect coordination with Hollywood, NASA announced the day before the film's release that it has conclusive evidence of liquid water on the surface of Mars. *The Martian* is a really, really good commercial for a future budgetary request.

By promoting the value of space exploration, the film also promotes the value of science. The book by Andy Weir on which the film is based is often described as little more than a series of scientific talking points. How will astronaut Mark Watney grow food? How will he light a fire in a setting scientifically engineered to be fireproof? How will he get enough water to grow crops? How will he make a rover designed to go no more than 35 kilometers travel more than 3,000 miles? In the film each prob-

lem becomes interesting, and each is solved with a combination of knowledge, ingenuity, and organic processes. Watney (Damon) swears at one point, "I'm going to science the hell out of this thing," and you want to cheer.

The film's final scene has Watney lecturing a group of eager would-be astronauts on how they'll have to hustle when everything goes sideways. When he asks if they have any questions, every hand shoots up just before the credits roll. The goal is noble: celebrate science in an America where science education has not been funded or lionized, and where it's been attacked by fundamentalists. We'll need more of this if we're going to go to Mars or save our once-hospitable planet. I salute the propaganda. But we should note that a sermon is being preached, and an altar call is expected.

What, then, about religion? There's not a lot for God to do in movies that lift up science as the solution to all problems. But even in *The Martian*, after you've worked all the science, it turns out you can still pray. There are nervous jokes about prayer in the endless mission control scenes. Watney manages to make a fire out of another astronaut's crucifix after apologizing to Jesus, figuring that Jesus of all people can understand a hopeless predicament.

Writing in *Slate*, Dan Kois notes that Weir's book is existentially tone deaf, but praises the film for its long sweeping images of desolate Mars, and its use of Damon's wonderful face to convey genuine angst and an existential quest. In this film, mystery is alive and God is never absent, even when his presence is unsought. Sometimes even Hollywood can see that.

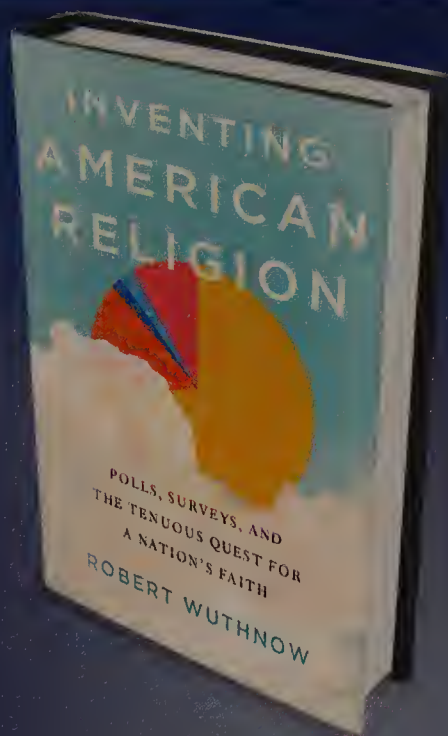


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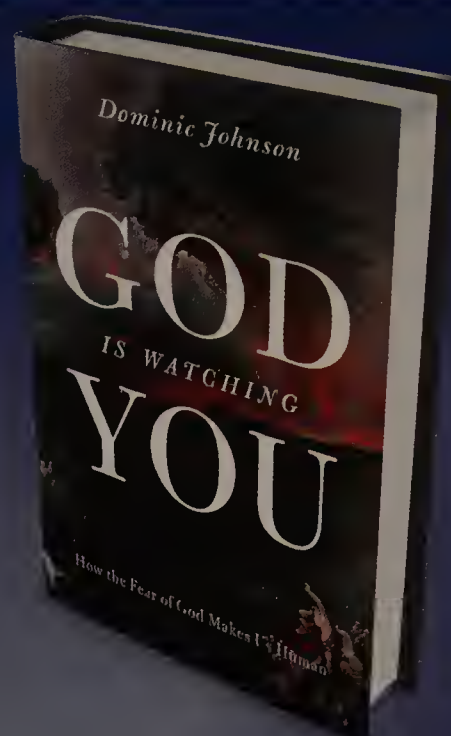
*Reviewed by Jason Byassee, who teaches homiletics and hermeneutics at Vancouver School of Theology.*

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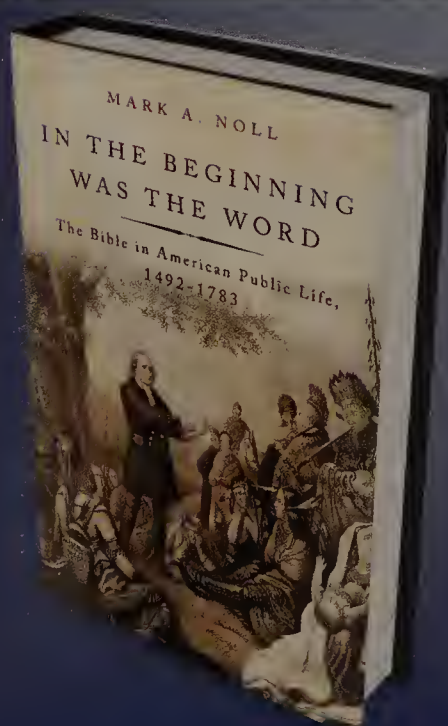


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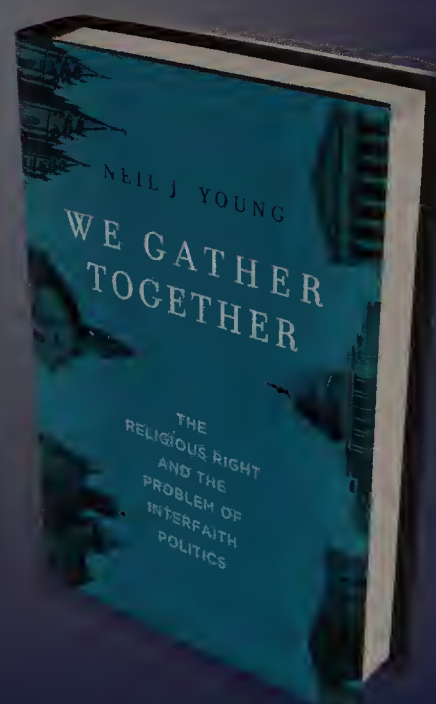


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by Carol Howard Merritt

# CHURCH in the MAKING

## Back at the burning bush

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, “Earth’s crammed with heaven, / And every common bush afire with God; / But only he who sees, takes off his shoes, / The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.” The members of Friendship Presbyterian Church longed to awaken to the heaven-crammed earth, so pastor Shawna Bowman constructed a five-foot bush out of a building tube, foam, and wire. She lit it up with Christmas lights and paper flames. Then members of the congregation asked one another, “What is our burning bush?” Each person plucked a flame with words of mission on it: “To speak up in truth.” “To work for peace.” “To forgive.”

The people at Friendship Church are creative on many levels. They regularly construct art in worship, celebrating with paint, paper, and color. Bowman has an undergraduate degree in studio art and art education, along with years of experience in teaching art at an elementary school. Friendship draws from her experience, setting the communion table with dishware from home, decorating the church windows with acrylics, and creating swirling murals. The people have also learned to be creative as they form their community and shape their narratives.

Friendship began when six churches of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), located within a five-mile radius in northwest Chicago, met with one another to see if they could collaborate. All were struggling to

maintain big buildings. “They went through a really hard process—grief work and identity work,” Bowman said.

Those who couldn’t imagine being without a church building pulled out of the process. In the end, only two congregations were left, and the remaining people wondered if it was worthwhile to keep working on creating something new. They decided that it was.

St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church and Norwood Park Presbyterian sold their properties, let go of their management structures, merged their ministries, and hired Shawna Bowman as pastor. In one way, they were a church in redevelopment—a merger with 50 core members. In another way, with their sense of innovation and adventure, they were like a new church start.

“There’s no ‘what we’ve always done,’ there’s only ‘what we want to do,’” Bowman said. “The remaining members have resiliency and hopefulness. They are open and fearless.”

Friendship rented a train station for its new venture—a stunning space, where the sunlight from clear windows reflects onto key-lime walls. The church is growing. A third of the members come from St. Andrews, a third from Norwood Park, and the final third are new members. Because of the intense process that they went through, people established deep, abiding relation-

ships, which is why they decided to name themselves Friendship. “Even though it’s cheesy, it’s perfect for them,” Bowman explained.

I wondered about the merger process, since I have heard nightmares of pastors trying to settle turf wars between various matriarchs and patriarchs. When I asked Bowman if the former congregations ever went through power struggles, she said they didn’t. “On any given Sunday, you can’t tell who is from the legacy congregations. I can’t always remember, and the new people don’t know at all.” It’s an intergenerational congregation, spanning from children to people in their nineties.

Lately, Friendship has embarked on a new adventure in creativity: learning to talk about the faith. People began by learning to tell stories. They worked with a comedian from Second City, the improvisational theater group where many of the country’s greatest comedians started their careers. They began to use story-starter questions at the beginning of every meeting, and they work with stories in worship.

For instance, they did a series on feasting, and each week told stories about Jesus at table. They set the communion table with dishes from

home, and remembered their own experiences of mealtime. They used questions like, “When did you have a surprise guest? What was your warmest meal? When have you felt unwelcome at a dinner table?” They recalled rich smells, delicious food, family dramas, dear friends, and awkward reunions. Bowman hopes that the constant creation of stories will lead to a better evangelism.

People at Friendship fell in love with the intimate feel of the train station, but now they’re realizing that it served as a powerful metaphor. It was just a stop for the congregation. They are outgrowing the space and looking for another place to worship.

“We are talking with a lot of partners,” Bowman said. They want a building that’s in use seven days a week in ways that reach out to the neighborhood. They would love to share a space with a not-for-profit, collaborate with a service organization, or partner with a social entrepreneur.

In all of the transitions, they’re going back to that burning bush, finding earth crammed with heaven, and joy in the wilderness. “We’re still doing good work around who we are and who God is calling us to be,” Bowman said. “We’re not in the Promised Land yet.”

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*Carol Howard Merritt is author of Tribal Church and cohost of God Complex Radio. Her blog is hosted by the CENTURY.*



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*Christ Pantocrator, Alpha and Omega, surrounded by angels, the elect, and Mary, Mother of God, Dome of Paradise, by Giusto de' Menabuoi (1320–1391)*

**C**hrist *Pantocrator* means “all-powerful or Almighty Christ.” The *Pantocrator* image, which typically depicts Christ seated in enthroned glory, was (and is) especially popular in the Byzantine icon tradition. The Florentine artist Giusto de’ Menabuoi painted this *Pantocrator* in the Baptistery of the Duomo in Padua around 1375. Christ is depicted seated in power and judgment. Inscribed on the book in his left hand are the words *Ego sum alpha et omega*—“I am the Alpha and the Omega” (Rev. 1:8). In the book of Revelation it is God who speaks these words; here Christ has been elevated to an equal status with God.

*Art selection and commentary by Heidi J. Hornik, who teaches in the art department at Baylor University, and Mikeal C. Parsons, who teaches in the school’s religion department.*



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